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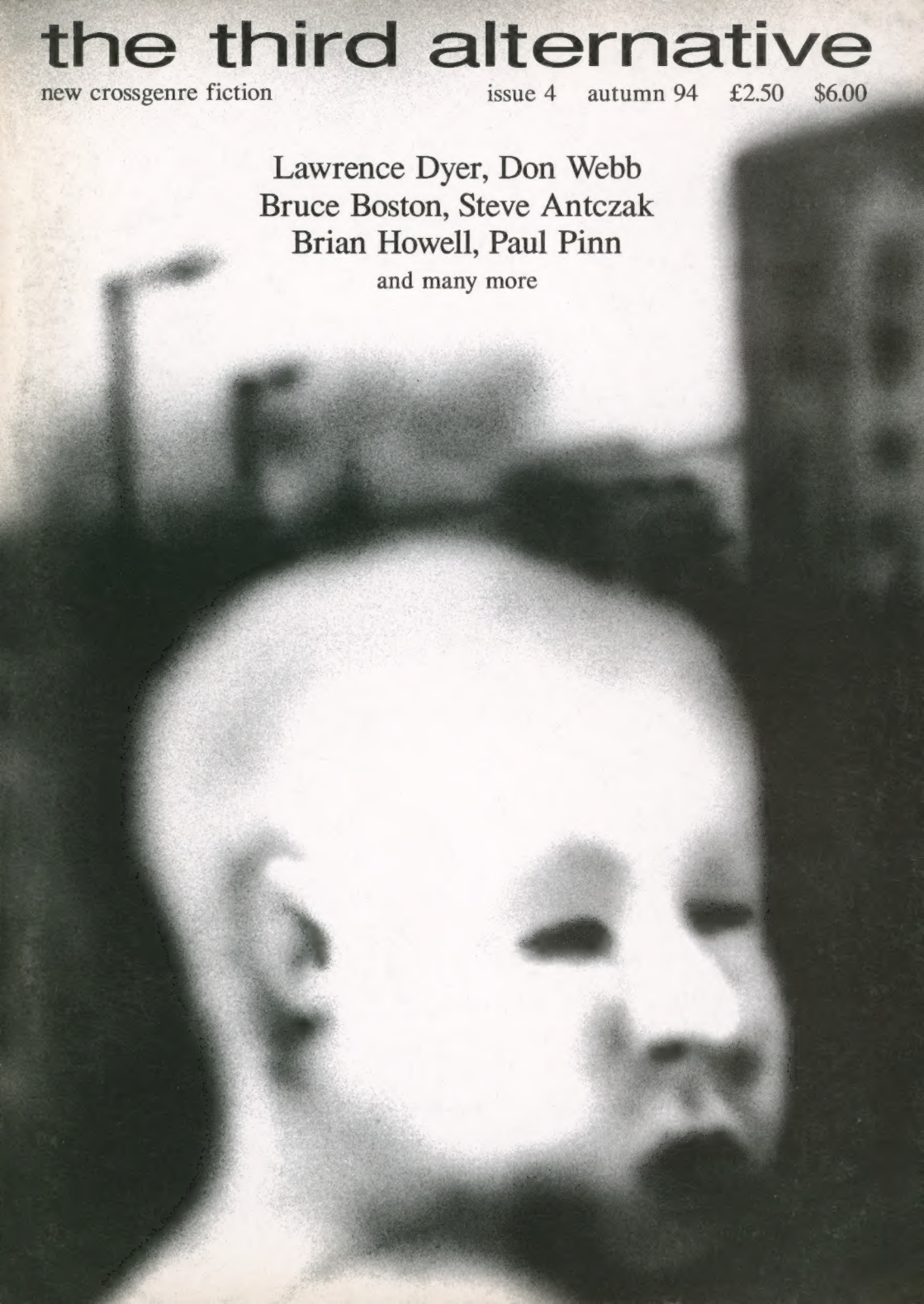

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Editorial

Welcome to TTA4. Slightly more of an American flavour than usual with Don Webb, Bruce Boston, Steve Antczak and Jessica Anderson, so this is perhaps a good time to tell you (as if you hadn't already noticed) that it's TTA policy to retain all American spellings in order to avoid losing any authenticity in the translation. Best for both writer and reader, I think.

I perhaps should also mention the policy regarding the use of artwork in this magazine, not that there have been any complaints. Quite the opposite in fact, with many people seemingly agreeing with me that while good illustration can be a bonus there's no real point in using often irrelevant drawings merely to 'break up the text'. I would even suggest that such a practice actually makes the page harder on the eye instead of easier, often forcing it to follow the words around jagged edges. Such spot illustrations can simply look messy. Besides, I believe that TTA readers have the attention span to last the length of a story without the need for distraction. And I would hope that the fiction is good enough to hold their attention in the first place!

As Alan Baker quite rightly states in the letters column, the A5 page doesn't lend itself ideally to the use of artwork anyway, which is another reason why I'm looking to use it in an original way, to complement rather than merely illustrate, to present it in its own right rather than as an appendage to something else. It's something to work towards anyway, and until it's right, until there are enough artists actually willing to be involved (I wish more artists would send in samples of their work, just as Ben Mitchell did), there might occasionally not be as much art in TTA as I'd like there to be. Hopefully, in time, it will become as important in the definition of TTA as its fiction is.

Meanwhile, I'd like to thank you for your support during TTA's first year of publication, especially those of you who go back even further, to the days when TTA was just a hefty non-issue attempting to impress the local Arts Board. May I take this opportunity to wish you all a very happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year, and, having softened you up, to ask you to continue your support of TTA through a *second* year of publication... and beyond!

Jack Limer's MONSTERS

LAWRENCE DYER

I first heard of Jack Limer's sea monsters in 1971. My father owned a small coconut plantation near Surat Thani on the east coast of Thailand, and Jack Limer would occasionally paddle across the calm waters of the lagoon to us, his little boat cutting a long wake through the lapis lazuli waters. The boat was named *Chang*, which is Thai for 'elephant'; it had a big lump of rust on the back that had known better days as an outboard motor. Jack came to join the hired labour, very unusual for a *farang* – a foreigner. He was a tall farang from America, with a mass of blond curly hair and an unkempt beard that looked as if it had been fried in coconut oil. We use the word 'blond' but I believe the Westerners say 'brown', and that real blond is even lighter than Jack's hair. With his pebble spectacles, and big, rough red hands, Jack wasn't like the romantic figures of the American films.

When he came to work for my father to put a few extra *baht* in his pocket he hardly noticed me, a Thai girl of fifteen. He lived on a little island about half a kilometre from the sugar-sands of the beach, an island that was part of a coral reef enclosing the lagoon. A few of the village children would sometimes swim out to his island, though you could wade most of the way if you avoided the broken coral rubbish on the bottom that could slice your feet open. The calmness of the lagoon helped you wade out too. At the shore the water seemed to be softly suffused with coconut milk where it licked at the fine sand with a tongue as gentle as those of the stray dogs sleeping the day away on the beach.

In the evenings we used to catch white crabs in the lagoon and sometimes Jack would buy a bucketful for two baht, I think just to have someone to talk to. He spent a lot of his time fishing from his island, and then he made a lonely figure that you could see from the mainland. At other times it amused us to see him fishing with a rod when he could have used a net like everyone else – farangs can be funny. Fish were what he seemed to live on, though I think he also dived for shells from time to time to send to the exporters in Bangkok. I don't think he ever sent them any of the sea monster bones.

Jack's island was flat and looked like the floor of a quarry – all dry rocks and dust in tones of fawn and grey that deepened to pale brown here and there on the boulders. He would range about this sepia landscape, a group of us kids in tow, telling us about his world. "Look at this," he would say, clambering amongst the stuff the island was made of, the stuff that came in a series of duplicated shapes and that clinked like cinders when you trod on it, which was all the time. "Anyone can see it's bones," he said. Then he would stop and confront us benignly with an expression that asked how could any reasonable person possibly think otherwise?

He was right too, the stuff looked exactly like bones.

He would search until he found a suitable bit of clinker – a leg-bone-shaped piece for example, of which there were lots on the island. Waving it at us, he would say it must have been the bone of a very strange creature indeed, and that maybe such creatures were still alive on other coral islands. Then, using the bone to demonstrate, he would imitate how the creature had walked when it was alive, and begin a comical ranging about the island with exaggerated steps that sent us all into fits of laughter.

He got me interested in the bones though, and sometimes I would wander alone about his domain or one of the smaller islands nearby, looking for interesting bones. Amongst the worn and pitted cowrie shells and crab claws washed up by high tides I'd find bones that looked like chunky grinding teeth. Then there were the branching bones like elaborate stags-horns that I particularly liked to find, and also exciting dagger-shaped fangs.

Jack would see me picking up bones and tell me to look out for any unusual or very fresh-looking ones, and to bring them to him if they weren't too heavy to carry. Around the little hut where he lived he had collected big piles of bones. There were waist deep in places and mostly sorted into piles of distinct types. Here there might be a low stack of what he called 'skull plates', there a heap of ribs or a precarious pile of brain-bones. The creatures weren't like us, he explained. He compared their brains to a living sponge-animal that has a minute network of hard stuff running throughout its soft body – an internal skeleton. You could find the internal skeletons of sponges inside flints as fossils, he told me, though I told him I didn't know what 'flints' were. Anyway, the point was, he said, becoming impatient, that though the soft matter of the creatures' brains rotted away after death, the minute network of hard stuff didn't, so their brains still looked like brains – albeit powdery grey ones – when only the brain-bone was left.

The biggest brain-bone he'd found was nearly a metre across, and though all the bones were a lot lighter than rock, something of such bulk was still very heavy indeed. Somehow he'd levered it over to his hut. "Just think of the size of the creature that had that for a brain!" he said.

He also had piles of little brain-bones that weren't brains at all, but eyes. You could tell this by their round shape and the patterns on their surface, he said. They were composite eyes like those of insects, he explained, and they functioned differently to our eyes that need to be hollow to let the light through.

"Just think," he said to me more than once, and usually taking in the scene around us with a dramatic sweep of his arm, "this whole island is just a big pile of bones rising up from the sea bed. Think of the thousands of creatures that died here. Were their bones swept here by the tide or did they all make their way here to die?" This question used to prey on his mind and he would repeat it time and again. He told me he heard strange sounds in the night sometimes as he lay in bed, and had even seen big formless shadows blocking out the moonlight that streamed through the window of his hut.

Jack's hut was built, Thai-style, on pillars that raised it above the level of potential floods. But it was only a little hut so it wasn't raised very high and there wasn't room to lie underneath in a hammock strung between the pillars, for example, as people in our village do under their huts in the hottest part of the day. Jack's hut was built in the

centre of the little island, close to the spiny bushes with the rusty tin cans around their roots that were the island's only vegetation. Inside, Jack's hut was equipped with shelves lined with newspapers, though I don't think he could read Thai. (His spoken Thai certainly wasn't very good.) On the shelves were tins, bottles and packets, but also books, sheaves of notes he'd made about the bones, and cuttings from English-language newspapers about sightings of sea monsters as far afield as Scotland and Alaska. The hut was like a little enclave of Americanness, or so it seemed to me. Jack was the kind of farang who finds himself in a place a long way from home but can't leave. He doesn't fit in, never can fit in, but he's stuck in the place and the more he tries to leave the more difficult it becomes. He once told me he'd packed up his papers and books and headed out on several occasions but he'd always found himself back in his hut by nightfall. It's as if the attempts to leave had gradually built a wall around him that prevented him ever escaping.

Jack was convinced the scientists had got it wrong. There were so many tales of sea monsters, he reasoned, that they couldn't all be made up. On his shelves he had several books about sea monsters, or accounts of voyages that included sightings of monsters, and he would read passages from them to me. Some of them were pretty convincing. These stories came from all over the world, he said, so there had to be something in them. He, for one, was sure there was. There on the island, staring everyone in the face who cared to see, were the bones of sea monsters. Once you looked at the evidence, he said, and you could see the truth, it became obvious, and he wondered how it was that he seemed to be the only man in existence to come to this conclusion about the island.

There were times when he would get drunk, and then a less savoury side of his character would come out. Sometimes then he'd invite a village girl called Jarunee over to his island. I kept away from the island when he drank, though I was there once and heard him talking to himself or maybe to Jarunee. He was inside his hut and shouted rather than spoke. When I realised he'd been on the bottle I decided not to hang around, but I heard what he said before I left. In his drunken state he had an answer to why no one else had come to the same conclusions that he had about the sea monsters. "There just can't be anyone else with your brains, Jack," I heard him say. "It stands to reason, my boy."

I could never decided whether Jack was right or not about his island of bones, but his ideas kept my attention. When he saw how interested I had become he would tell me more and more about his theories. He'd been living on the island about fifteen years by then but had never done anything about his ideas, other than collect more and more stuff in support of them. It seemed to be my interest that spurred him into doing something, though I never encouraged him.

Soon, when I visited him, he began to show me elaborate drawings he'd done of the skeletons of sea monsters, based on the bones he'd collected. He was a fairly accomplished artist and his drawings were pretty good. He compared himself to a nineteenth century fossil collector from England trying to work out the correct reconstruction of a mixed bag of dinosaur bones; he would constantly sketch different interpretations of his treasures. The task was made more difficult by the fact that there were obviously several different species of sea monster involved, he said. He would often ponder for days on the correct interpretation

of a particular piece of bone, and sometimes the problem would become insurmountable and he would sulk and be inconsolable. It was then he would take to the bottle. But I would go over the next day, expecting to find him in the same wretched state as the day before and he would come running up to me full of excitement.

"Me, depressed? Never!" he would declare to my question about what had changed from yesterday. Then I would have to listen to his excited account of how he had faced a problem with no answer and how he had just given up looking when the solution came to him in a flash while he was eating breakfast.

Then he would get out, say, a flat piece of bone with oval holes in it, the culprit that had given him the problem, and explain that the function of this bone that had so eluded him was now obvious. It was? "Why yes!" he would shout, slapping the little all-purpose table in his hut. "It's part of the creature's plating on its back – protection against attack by other species of sea monster!" And he'd add that wasn't it true that Clumberlane in 1861 or Lord Silverstone in 1798, or whoever, had described just such a feature in the monster he'd seen?

One day when I went by Jack's place he was building the first of his creations. Not far from the edge of the lagoon he'd collected together and laid out on the ground a complete skeleton of a sea monster. Just a small one to begin with, he explained, though it was the size of a cow. He'd got everything in place, suitably-sized eyes and brain and a long jaw-bone that he'd fitted pointed black teeth into. Beside the head was a pile of broken skull plates that he was going to fit together over the brain like a jigsaw puzzle. What caught my attention though was what he was doing on the body of the kit-made creature. He was sewing a thick fleshy skin into place over a rib cage he'd reconstructed from broken ribs and tree resin. The skin was fresh, though it was already curling up at the edges into brittle seams of dried blood. Creamy-white on the outside, the skin was blood-red underneath. I could smell it, and his shirt and trousers were covered in blood. "Where did that come from?" I asked.

With a flick of his head he indicated behind him. I went to have a look and there were the remains of a cow he'd butchered. The cow was bright red and emaciated where he'd taken all the flesh from its body, but the skin was still intact on its head and made it look as if it was still alive somehow, despite the state of its body. To one side its guts were piled up; I wondered if he intended to use these in his creation too.

I wasn't the only one aware of his work, either: flies were buzzing round the offal in droves.

I turned back to Jack. "Where did you get the cow? Did you buy it?"

"It was a stray," he said as he worked, nipping the flesh together over the sea monster bones with one hand and sewing it in place with the other.

I wondered how he'd got the cow to the island – had he walked it through the lagoon or had he killed it then floated its body over? "Well I hope it didn't belong to anyone."

He didn't reply but just kept sewing.

"Is this the next stage in reconstructing what they were like, then?" I asked, indicating his work.

He still didn't look up. "Yes, but maybe more than just reconstruction. Maybe much more than that's possible with these living bones."

Now that he mentioned it I noticed that the bones he was rapidly covering with flesh looked fresh and white and

some were tinted with various colours. "Living bones?"

"Yes, why use dead ones if you can use live ones?"

"But where did you get them?"

He stopped what he was doing and looked at me. "Haven't you ever seen the living bones on the ocean side of this island?"

I shook my head.

He got up from his work and went for a leather bucket lying nearby. Leaning over a rock he dipped the bucket in the lagoon then trickled the contents over his unfinished creation. "I guess that'll keep it fresh for a while. Let's go."

A few minutes later we were swimming in the open sea on the other side of Jack's island. It was a revelation. There, under the water, were hundreds of living bones, in all colours and sizes, kept alive by the sea water, Jack said. I'd never swum on that side of the reef before because my father always warned me that there were sharks beyond the lagoon. Of course, from above the surface I'd seen the distorted, shifting images of what I now realised were living bones, but that was no comparison with the effect of seeing them through Jack's transparent face mask.

The water was very warm and nearly as calm as the lagoon. As it slopped over my head I held my breath for as long as I could while I swam along looking down at the scene below through the face mask. I was like a bird flying over a beautiful landscape. I saw miniature mountains with swellings of geometrically patterned brain-bones that looked like neat shrubs along the mountain slopes. Some of the valleys and mountainsides were thick with 'forests' of upright bones. The stags-horn bones I'd been collecting were amongst them, except that alive they were covered in soft vellum, smooth and oval and either honey-brown or a surprising green that glowed. Other 'trees' were like the tiers of a cedar I once saw in the grounds of a *wat* in Chiang Mai: they had flattened, fan-like growth. Here they grew along miniature hillsides and were bright-green tipped at the edges with a lighter green that shaded to cream, as if they were still growing at the extremities.

Amongst the 'trees' I saw isolated living bones that were rather like a brain-bone but shaped like the 'corn-cob' type of Buddhist temple to be seen in many parts of our country; some of the underwater versions had mouth-like depressions in the top. This made me feel even more that I was somehow flying over the Thai countryside! The true brain-bones I saw in the valleys of the undersea version were inscribed with patterns like curling mazes or with geometric designs in such variety it was hard to find two the same. And the colours! Some had raised patterns in deep purple with translucent blue 'wax' in the depressions; others were a pale, bright mauve. Less tight brains with looser whorls were a vivid yellow-green. Then I saw orange stags-horn bones tipped with fluorescent light-blue, like flowers on the ends of their branches. And moving between the trees, where you would expect herds of cows on the land, there were flashes of colourful fish.

I came up and trod water, enthralled by the brightness of the colours of the living bones. But how could sea water keep them alive? The bones of other animals would have just died.

"You have to remember the sea monsters are an entirely different order of creature from what we know," Jack told me.

He went on to say he'd even given them a collective name, which he'd devised that very morning. The name

was *Extrano-dracs,* which meant 'strange dragons' in Latin, he explained.

"Obviously an interesting characteristic of Extrano-dracs," Jack added, "is that their bones remain alive after the death of the creature and the decay of its flesh – so long as the bones are kept covered by sea water."

The following day my father told me there'd been trouble out at Jack's island the night before. The herdsman whose cow Jack had butchered for his experiment had gone with some other men and beaten Jack up. Jack wasn't badly hurt apparently, but my father told me I was to keep away from the island from then on. Of course, I objected, like young people do when their parents lay down the rules, but he was adamant, I wasn't to go to the island again.

A month passed and the fuss about Jack died down. Then one day my favourite cousin, Kwy, said he had heard Jack had hired Somchai, a no-good who lived on the edge of the village. I wondered what Jack was up to now, and as it had been a month since the trouble, I decided to find out.

On Jack's island I saw that the sea monster he had been reconstructing was finished. Worse, he had almost finished another one. The second was twice as big as the first and its skin looked suspiciously like that of water buffalo. Somchai and Jarunee were finishing off one of the monster's stout legs by sewing buffalo skin around live fin-bones that stuck out all up the outside of each leg to make a long crenated fin. At the creature's side was a bamboo framework they'd obviously used as scaffolding in the making of the monster.

I stared at the creatures in disbelief at first. They looked real. Each stood on all fours with back legs shorter than the front. Long tapering necks ended in large-brained heads with bulging eyes and tapering snouts full of teeth. Long, smooth tails completed the picture. Jack had propped up their long necks and heads with bamboo poles, but despite this, with their skin wet they looked as if they had just crawled out of the lagoon.

I went up to the big dark one and reached out a hand to touch its skin in disbelief.

"Pretty impressive, eh?" Jack said, bringing a bucket of water to throw over the monster to keep it damp.

I nodded. I was looking up at the head of the creature. Its alien eyes were a moist, vivid blue, etched in a design like a honeycomb. For an instant the creature seemed to move and I flinched, but it was only the clouds in the sky passing behind its head that created the illusion. I turned my attention to the smaller, pale-skinned monster, with its shorter neck and tail.

"The small one's a different species of Extrano-drac," Jack said. "I finally figured it all out." Then, using the bamboo scaffold he climbed up on top of the big monster and sat astride the base of its neck, just where its bony back plates began. "The only man in history to ride a sea monster!" he called down to me. "Beat that at the rodeo!"

"But they're not real?" I said doubtfully.

"Why not? If I keep them wet then who knows? And if that doesn't work out maybe the sight of them will attract some of their kind out of the ocean."

I looked up at him in surprise but he was looking back earnestly. I said, "They won't like this at the village. They'll say you'll bring the spirits down on us."

He shrugged.

"But anyway, you've used water buffalo hide haven't you?" I said, trying

to reassure myself. "That's not the same as real sea monster skin is it?"

"Why not?" Jack said, looking down from his perch on the back of the monster. "It's all flesh isn't it? People have organs transplanted nowadays so why not skin transplants?"

"But what about the people who owned the buffaloes?" I could see he had used more than one water buffalo and guessed that he hadn't bought them; no doubt he'd slaughtered them himself, or got Somchai to do it on the shore.

He shrugged again, then told me, "Don't worry, it'll turn out alright."

"I don't know Jack, I'm frightened," I told him.

"Of what?"

I didn't answer. I didn't know if I was frightened of what the owners of the slaughtered buffaloes might do or if I was frightened of what Jack had created.

A storm blew up that night, and as I listened to the wind whistling around the pillars that supported the village houses I wondered if the buffalo owners or herdsmen would go after Jack again and what would happen if they did.

It was about nine o'clock in the evening when word reached the village that there was a rogue elephant creating havoc on Jack's island. It had been dark a couple of hours by then but the moon was out, dancing in and out of speeding clouds. There were wild elephants in the mountain forests around Khao Yai, some forty kilometres inland, and working elephants much closer, but it was rare to see one at the coast, rare enough and strange enough to make all the villagers go down to the beach to see for themselves, despite the storm. Of course, I went with them.

Down at the beach the wind was tearing across the lagoon, whipping the usually calm water into one or two metre waves that rushed up the beach and in amongst the palms. Fallen coconuts floated in pools of water between the palms, and pieces of airborne debris came tearing by in the dark.

We held on to the palm trunks and got as near to the beach as we could before peering out into the seething air. Attacked by clouds, the moon illuminated the scene on and off, like giant stage lighting. When the moon came out we could see the island silhouetted against the lighter sea beyond. And each time it came out we strained our eyes trying to make out what was happening out there.

"The elephant!" someone shouted, and then all eyes were trying to pick it out. Then I saw it, a humped, dark shape moving quickly across the island. The moon went behind a cloud then came out again and now the dark shape of the elephant was going the other way across the island. We glimpsed it between the dark swells of waves cutting across our view: it seemed to stop, move, stop, then go back the other way, but rapidly, as if it was crashing about the island in a mad frenzy. Then it ran into something square and it half reared up, as if it was attacking what it had run into, and I realised it was demolishing Jack's hut. The animal charged the hut over and over again and we saw pieces of the structure being tossed into the sky where they were caught by the wind and swept away. The moonlight was lost again and when it returned Jack's hut had gone. The dark hump that was the elephant was still moving about the island.

Kwy, my cousin, shouted to his older brothers that they should try to get out to the island to save Jack, who we knew was alone out there that night.

"How?" came the reply, shouted over the gale. And it was clearly impossible, none of our little open canoes would

bear up for more than a few seconds in that sea, and as for trying to swim out..!

All we could do was watch, but pretty soon a palm tree came down not far away from where we were standing and the *puyaibun*, the head of the village, told us all to go back to our houses. We did and tried to keep warm and dry as best we could while the gales threatened to tear the roofs from our dwellings.

The storm didn't abate until first light. The scene in the village when people ventured outside their shuttered homes was one of devastation. The roof had come off the house of the Pansook family during the night and two metre long combs of palm leaves from the roof lay about the village at odd angles. The Pansooks had spent the night with their neighbours, lamenting over what had happened to their home. Two of the big drinking-water pots in the centre of the village had been smashed when tin sheeting blew off a storage hut and sliced into them, and the pots would be expensive to replace. A dog had been killed and our ducks and pigs had been scattered across kilometres of the surrounding coconut plantations.

No one had had any sleep and it was still windy, but it was decided that a group of men should go out to the reef to look for Jack. I begged to go with them and at first was told it was too dangerous, but I insisted that as I was his friend I should go, and in the end they let me. Luckily my father had gone into the plantation to inspect the damage to the trees or he would have stopped me.

The waters of the lagoon had subsided from the beach now, though the white sand was thick with debris and there was a distinctive, fresh smell in the air. Corals and smashed canoes tangled with ropes and dead fish were heaped up all along the beach, and there were coconuts everywhere.

The men carried down from the village a canoe that had been under repair when the storm hit, and so had survived in the relative protection of the village. I climbed in and was joined by four others including Kwy, then the canoe was launched across the lagoon. It was still raining but the rain here is warm so that wasn't a problem—people often go fishing in the rain, standing up to their waists in the lagoon and feeling none the worse for lack of protective clothing. The water out in the lagoon was choppy though and it was difficult to keep the canoe on course. In the end two of the men got into the water, one on each side of the vessel, and pushed it in to Jack's island.

Even before we got to the island we could see how it had been damaged. All the bushes had been flattened or pulled out by the roots and Jack's hut had completely gone. It was too dangerous to take the canoe right up to the jagged rocks at the edge of the island so one man stayed with the boat a few metres out. The rest of us climbed out into the water. It shifted alarmingly up and down between the rocks, but holding on to their rough sides we felt our way with our feet over the rocky bottom until we could get to the shore. The men made certain I didn't slip.

When we pulled ourselves out onto the land it didn't even look like Jack's island anymore. We went over to where his hut should have been. Only the stubs of the pillars were left. It had been a strong hut that had always survived storms in the past. Jack's stacks of bones were largely scattered, whether by the storm or the rogue elephant it was impossible to say. Then, lying between the scattered bones I spotted something gold. I picked it up and it was Jack's gold pen, though it was broken. We couldn't find anything else of his. There was no sign of his creations.

Then there was a shout to one side and we hurried over to see what the fuss was about. Two of the men had found Jack. He was in a shallow pit between some big rocks and he'd obviously lashed himself to the rocks to guard against being swept away by the storm. But something had crushed his head flat and there were deep slash marks across his chest. You could only tell it was him from what was left of his clothes; it was a terrible sight I'll never forget.

We took him back across the lagoon and buried him not far up from the beach. Some said that the herdsman had killed him – crushed his head with a rock – and that there had never been a rogue elephant.

Only in the days that followed the aftermath of the storm did we begin to seriously discuss whether there really was an elephant loose on the island that night. If there was then it would have had to pass through the land belonging to various villages on the way from the forests to the island. News travels fast round here but we had heard nothing, and when Kwy made enquiries we learned that no one knew anything about a rogue elephant. No crops had been damaged, no fences or trees broken down prior to the storm. Elephants that do damage in this part of the world are very rare anyway; elephants are usually gentle, well-trained creatures here.

All this happened more than twenty years ago of course, and nowadays there are three tourist hotels along the beach for the rich farangs to live in. I'm now the manager of one of them.

Things aren't all peace and tranquillity though. Peculiar things have happened over the years. Last week a tourist was found dead. The police say it's a mystery because the man looked as if he'd been run over. But he was found up the coast, over two kilometres from the road. On the same night a fisherman said he saw a man riding a very strange-looking elephant amongst the palms. There was a smaller, paler-skinned elephant following.

Myself, I wonder if old Jack and his creations are still about.

***Lawrence Dyer** appeared in issue one of TTA with the hugely popular 'The Angel of the Moor'. His stories are published in many other magazines including Interzone.*

THE WAITER

TONY LEWIS-JONES

***Tony Lewis-Jones** is the editor of the poetry/graphics magazine 'Various Artists'.*

Wednesday night. I have reserved
their usual table. Punctual and smart,
he sits and stares out at the street until
she arrives in an aura of expensive scent
twenty minutes late. He holds her languid hand
and whispers that the hotel room is booked
a taxi ride away across the city. I bring
an unromantic red. It seems to help.

I'm part of the establishment. I collect
their over-generous tip. We are discreet.
Unkinder worlds await them. She always wears
something spectacular, though recently
I've noticed her attention deviate
from his attentions. They won't survive.
The doomed are strangely beautiful to watch.

the surface of truth

JESSICA ANDERSON

In his dream Kit is making love. He is the wave which breaks upon the woman's pale strand, spinning through worlds of sinuous light and sensual derangement. In the shudderous release, he sends a twisting dance of D.N.A. striving relentlessly towards infinity. A million tiny engines of life.

When he awakes, reality blitzes in, as always. The morning reveals a world as glaring and angular as a cubist nightmare. Kit surveys his shabby bedsit for a few moments, then runs his fingers over his blond crew-cut. As usual he does not look at his body as he rises; but as he walks over to the chair where his clothes are slumped he begins to strip off the sweatshirt and jogging pants he sleeps in during the long winter nights. Almost to punish himself for yielding to the phantasmagoria of sleep, Kit looks toward the mirror in which his naked body is revealed. He surveys the form with disgust, the lack of height, the breasts, then the crotch and the space where his male genitalia should be. A woman's body. Waking up is always like this, the feeling of somatic revulsion. True horror is intimate, internal.

Kit dresses quickly in jeans and a loose black sweater, takes a testosterone pill from the bottle on his bedside table and washes it down with a glass of rusty water from the single tap above the chipped sink in the room's corner.

It has been eight months since his doctor had referred him to a specialist in gender dysphoria. The shrink had slapped the label 'transsexual' on him, but Kit knew that the man's understanding could never be as developed as his wish to help. Kit's true feelings were impossible to explain. Some abysses cannot be leaped. Most people never realize that there is something deeper than the superficial representation of gender, that it can be wrong.

Just before his nineteenth birthday Kit had changed his name and left his home town. He began to take the male hormones which would slowly change his secondary sexual characteristics. Kit was put on a surgeon's list for penoplasty. However, in reality even the best surgeons in the world could do no more than build up a rough interpretation of a penis by a series of painful and terrible surgeries. They'd call him a freak. Many already did. Life is like that.

Kit is unable to sleep. It is late in the chill winter evening. Laying on his sagging bed, he hears the distant whoosh as the new bullet train passes through the town, bound southwards. The sudden intrusion breaks the surface tension of silence, invading Kit's entropic universe. A small insistent engine begins to turn at the center of his being. Kit sits up and looks out the window at the full moon. He feels the pressure build up within him; he cannot stand the imprisonment

of the room any longer. He dresses in the dark, laces his boots and takes a kitchen knife from the table and places it in his jacket pocket. He does not know where he is going, only that he must get out and walk. With the keys in his hand he suddenly thinks of something. Kit switches on the naked bulb; then, squinting in the harsh light, he takes a pen and writes onto the wallpaper above his bed:

> I will tell you this:
> skin is a lie;
> that the surface of truth
> is red, redder, reddest.

Wandering, Kit looks above the rooftops and the streetlights, to the cold immensity beyond. When he puts his hands into his pockets he remembers the knife.

Passing through the town center he surveys the dead streets, and the alluring storefronts, promising monetary consumer-burn bliss. Kit keeps on walking. At the edge of town he stops at the bridge spanning the railway track. He recalls a time when as a child he had traveled through just such a night on a train. Through the window the moonlight had measured the spaces between the naked trees in silver heartbeats while his eyes had weaved the motion-fluid tracks. Movement has a logic all its own.

As he stands in thought, he hears the click of a woman's heels on the pavement. Kit turns and watches a young brunette walk onto the bridge, then averts his gaze and listens to her passing. He wants to call out to her, to ask what all this means; he wants somebody to hold him, to truly understand. He had tried visiting lesbian bars but the women there had not understood, they did not want him but something he was not and could never be. When the girl has passed, the anger rises up again. That systaltic red engine. Gritting his teeth he removes the knife, rolls up his left sleeve and surveys the goosepimpled skin in the streetlight's sodium glare. On a sudden impulse, Kit stabs at the exposed skin, but it has a surprising, rubberlike quality. At the next stab, the tension yields and the blade sinks into the tensed muscle beneath. Only at this moment of pain does the suffering clear itself from his mind. He drops the knife and punches the concrete with his right fist until his knuckles are cut and numbed. He knows what he must do.

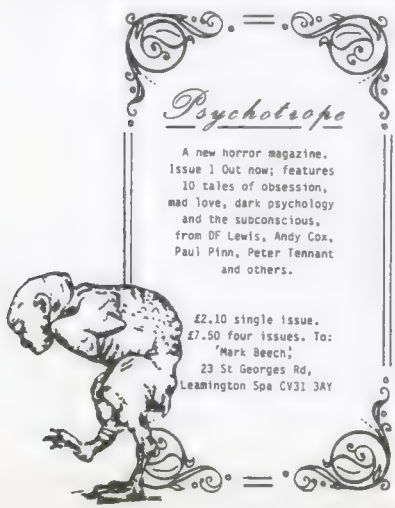
As he leaves the bridge the world is revealed in all its haunting beauty. The cold, quick fingers of the wind weave a silken robe around him. The only part of him that feels alive is his bleeding arm. All the town's windows are closed and black. He is invisible. The grass at his feet glistens with flowerings of frost, while the far clock beats a cool bronze pulse. The full moon presides over a night vaster and colder than the world itself. Kit strips off his clothes at the fence leading to the embankment; below him the railway track stretches out to encase the world within its iron mesh. Throwing his jacket and jeans onto the barbed wire top of the steel fence, he struggles up and leaps to the other side. Stumbling, he rolls down the bank to alight on the track's icy gravel, dazed and bleeding. Standing slowly, Kit kicks off his shoes, then tears away his underwear. Above him, the electric wires glisten in the moonlight.

It is nearly time. Kit screams out; the night answers with an undulance of steel on steel. As the train hurtles toward him at over two hundred kilometers an hour, Kit discards the knife and runs along the track to meet it. Time slows to a standstill. Up above, the eye of the full moon does not blink. Kit's body stretches achingly toward

the lunar disc; his breasts recede; muscles strengthen and flex. Down at his crotch a nascent cock rises up. The overhead wires sing with the approach of the serpent electric. He runs faster, that inner engine released into frenzied, gnostic industry.

The meeting with the train brings sudden disorientation, like that when the knife had pierced his flesh, only this time strong enough for him to envision with a clarity never before experienced; the universe opens up while a god of light dances through his soul. In the next moment, his gross somatic form unfolds like a terrible flower. Now, with one white-light synaptic pulse of pressure the train recedes along the track, unimpeded. Kit erupts from the immaculate womb of the train's rear, lips curled back in a spasm of exultation. His inner engine dissolves; silence enwraps the world. To Kit's left a fine red mist falls. Now, in the afterburn of sensation, he espies a red form; a heart, steaming on the gravel. The torn aorta and pulmonary artery continue to pulse, like the limbs of a primal invertebrate washed onto a hostile shore. Kit keeps running.

Jessica Anderson *is a very talented new American writer living in London.*



IN

BRIAN HOWELL

Nick looked out over the City and thought of the times he would take his wife and daughter out for a stroll in Hyde Park or on Hampstead Heath, or even just go on an arbitrary shopping spree. Amanda was two or three then and already looking very much like her mother. Claire too could remember a time when everything seemed to revolve around going out and breathing fresh air. *Going in* was something you did mainly for entertainment, but at least you had to go out first. One would, at times, of course, go out in order to go somewhere, to do the shopping or some business in the old-fashioned way.

Amanda was now ten and fairly healthy, but her body had never taken on that hoped-for suppleness that he had expected would remind him of Claire, nor did her cheeks recall the expected soft pinkness that first captivated Nick in his wife.

He could only vaguely recall when the initial fears were voiced. It was a time of prosperity, of renewed financial vigour, when people really had the energy to go out and *do* things, to create new businesses, to move across the country at the drop of a hat to start a new job. It was also a euphoric time for them in as much as they *seemed* to be attaining everything they had wanted — the right circle of friends, satisfying work, a beautiful house that reminded them of another time — but deep down they felt a tinge of guilt. There were wars, small ones, happening everywhere, sometimes between whole countries, sometimes between factions, political and religious. Except at home. It never really affected them in the way it should have, but now, of course, such things were truly inconceivable. And then Amanda was born and it seemed they could have no greater joy.

It was around this time, however, that Nick first became aware of a pattern of reports and speculations which at first had no discernible effect on their way of life, but which began to manifest itself in a series of both private and public obsessions.

Maybe it began with the fears about the water, but then those fears were mostly allayed by a big scandal at the time which had something to do with someone sabotaging the supplies for political reasons.

Then there was a series of man-made disasters, but somehow it would have been petty to worry too much about the odd train or airplane crash when experts were warning of problems on a much larger scale.

When Nick cried one evening in front of the television over the deaths of another thirty train commuters, he didn't quite know if he cried for the commuters or for himself, and in any case how true really was this emotion when, on subsequent occasions, he found he could not scale up his reaction to take in the latest 'natural' tragedy which had dispensed with another ten thousand lives in South America or another thirty thousand in Asia.

Long before the air pollution became an irreversible problem, Nick could see things leading to the present situation. Too much political capital had been made of this series of natural and not-so-natural disasters. Everything led inwards. It wasn't safe to travel by train, plane or even car. You couldn't swim in seas or lakes or eat food from either. It therefore came as no surprise that the Party saw fit to emphasise the advantages of the home, of the inner world available to everyone at the touch of a button.

They had resisted, joined 'outside' movements, campaigned, but eventually all such opposition had been made illegal. Now it existed, passively, in pockets of people who could only communicate through officially monitored media.

He could hear Claire and Amanda in the front room arguing about what channel to tune in to on the television. It is true, there was plenty of choice, over fifty channels in fact, and five recorders weren't nearly enough to keep up with everything. They had applied to the government for another one. If you could prove that you had watched enough programmes on any given day and recorded a selection from a cross-section of channels that, in their view, best reflected the day's output, you stood to win a video recorder and television. They gave away about five a day in London alone. Nick and Claire's neighbours, Gerald and Hermione, were so good at it that they could hardly move around their flat for video recorders and TV sets. But it was hard to get a real idea of their flat's dimensions, since Nick and Claire only ever saw it through the Freedom Channel.

The Freedom Channel was the nearest service they now had to the old postal system, since the messages they received on the little Comtel monitors could only show pictures made up from blocks of colour like a cubist Picasso run amok. So every now and then they would see Gerald and Hermione bunched up in front of the screen, giggling like two children who had just discovered a new toy, talking endlessly without direction, just filling in the fifteen-minute slot allocated to them, but always managing to get in the inevitable, 'Oh, yes, and you must come over some time. We'd love to see you', before they disappeared into the blackness.

Even when Amanda was five, she thought that Gerald and Hermione existed in the tiny brilliant silver star that got ever tinier till it merged completely with the blackness of the screen. To her the blackness was the sky and she would always search that blackness for another star, but never found one. It took Nick's prize telescope to convince her that there were more stars—in the sky. Amanda at first thought this was a trick, as Nick often had to wait weeks, sometimes months, for the right moment for the sky to clear. It was a relief when she finally accepted that there was a real sky.

Even now, however, Nick found it difficult to fully explain why it was so dark outside most of the day, why you couldn't open the window. Amanda often asked why the homes outside looked so different from the ones in the old photos, and Nick would just look at Claire with a beseeching expression, not daring to really say anything.

When the TV people first started to put out shows catering to every conceivable taste or need, Nick and Claire were extremely excited. There was a Books channel where the latest works would be analysed and reviewed. Sometimes the authors would be interviewed in their homes and talk animatedly about the Situation Today and the State of the Novel, but these interviews with the more stimulating authors whom

Nick and Claire remembered from before the changes became fewer and fewer. They were eventually replaced by a series of Authors of Today, as they were termed, whose faces soon became over-familiar, since no new authors ever seemed to join their illustrious ranks, and if one did, he would look and speak so much like his peers that Nick and Claire could no longer be sure who had left and who had joined. These authors kept up a constant flow of titles that were invariably described by the reviewers as ground-breaking or original, when in fact they were recycling old ideas and themes already dealt with in much more original ways well before Today became 'in'. The frustrating aspect of it was that Nick wasn't aware that these books were actually available except in summaries —of varying lengths—on a screen to which one could subscribe at very low cost.

The Books channel was only one of a vast range of channels catering to almost every need, from the basest to the most intellectually aspiring. The 'channels' were in actuality extended programmes without form which sometimes appeared at random and without warning on other channels. Hard and soft pornography was served up regularly on its own dedicated channels, but made unpredictable excursions into others, such as the Children's and the Cookery channels.

At first Nick and Claire thought it wasn't a bad idea to be shown everything at every conceivable moment. They had believed that children would be less inhibited as a result, but the eventual effect was to lessen interest in their own bodies, to make them view them as sickly and pale till they no longer had the desire even to make love. Maybe it was a blessing in disguise, they sometimes reasoned, since it was difficult to make love with the child always somewhere in the flat. Nevertheless, Claire did become worried about her lack of drive, but then her friends told her on the videophone that it was much the same case with them, and, after all, what could you do? There was little enough space in their homes as it was, and no one knew how long the Regulations would be in force. There was no need for contraception.

Nick often wished they could just simply go out and watch a new movie or at least sit in and watch one, but there were only ever old movies endlessly repeated, even cut up or with scenes from other movies inserted. At times he even thought that the number of exterior scenes in films was being reduced after each subsequent screening. Certainly, there were no exteriors in made-for-television programmes, except for the tops of buildings or military aircraft. It was true that no one else noticed these changes. He was trying to remember when he last went out. Maybe it was with Claire and Amanda on one of their trips out to Kenwood.

He went into the living-room and found them slouched against the sofa on the floor, engrossed in a movie he knew to be set entirely within the confines of a spaceship. It was phenomenally popular at the moment. Claire's arm was draped around Amanda's shoulder.

He wondered if she had seen the special offer on the Comtel screen that morning. Generally, she did not bother with the service, believing it to be just another form of propaganda. They had once been tempted to take part in a game in which one interacted with a film drama featuring one's family and some friends having a meal.

One would watch oneself and one's partner in a particular scene until one was presented with a choice of dialogue or action which would take the

story in a different direction. The point seemed to be to avoid arguing or coming to blows with one's best friends over the inevitable political subjects that would surface.

The one time they had played the game with Gerald and Hermione participating from their home, the game had ended in disaster when Nick had murdered Gerald on screen. It had been a sore point ever since.

This new offer, however, was something special. First of all, it offered the almost unbelievable opportunity to go outside. Furthermore, it was about the only chance anyone would ever have to fly again in the old aeroplanes before they were scrapped; they were being brought out of retirement for this celebration.

Claire would doubtless say it was a publicity stunt to promote the government's new 'transporters' that, in *Star Trek* fashion, scrambled a person's molecular structure in one place and reassembled it in another. This, they were told, was a more economic and viable alternative to implementing the tremendous task of constructing underground tunnels linking everyone's homes.

"Anyway, we won't be able to see anything because of the smog," was Claire's inevitable reaction.

"It says on the Comtel that they've chosen a day when the smog will lift temporarily. We may never get another chance. Just think how much it'll mean to Amanda."

His last comment seemed to light a spark in Claire. She suddenly gave the matter more consideration at mention of their daughter. "What about Gerald and Hermione? Are they going?"

"I don't know. Shall we ask?"

"Why absolutely," said Hermione on screen. "We were just about to call you and ask the same thing." She leant closer to her monitor, as if to confide something. "Well, I suppose it's academic, really. Almost everyone else we know is going. You are going too, aren't you?"

He knew what she meant by 'almost everyone we know'. Speaking in code like this was almost their only way of staying in contact with others from the movement, though he was surprised Hermione still kept it up. It occurred to him that her superficial dottiness might be an act to dispel suspicion. Did anybody really care anymore?

"Yes, we think so," Nick said, his confirmation perhaps a little premature, but Claire did not contradict him.

"Perhaps we'll even be on the same flight. Who knows? See you soon."

Nick stayed up most of that night after being woken by strong vibrations that shook the house, but Claire lay undisturbed. The sound was coming from above and was vaguely familiar. He hardly allowed himself to believe what first occurred to him.

He went up to the glass dome in the roof and looked up but could see nothing, only hear the rumbling in the sky which reminded him of the old-fashioned bomber plane raids during the wars. Were they perhaps testing out the planes, flying them all to one point for the big day?

It was a cruel irony that these glass domes originally fitted to each home during the Period of Optimism when the government had made a cult out of observing the night sky, of emphasising their connection to the stars through travel and the increased knowledge that brought, now only served to highlight how far the situation had been reversed. These opaque views of

the sky refuted the myopia of those early policies more than could have any outright resistance.

Nick remembered an old war movie and felt like a gunner in the turret of a bomber surveying the sky for possible enemy attack. Soon, he guessed, even the idea that wars had ever taken place outside would disappear until the public's visual conception of war consisted purely of compilations of people huddled in underground air-raid shelters and tube stations.

In the bedroom Claire had pushed back the sheets, and the sight of her naked body awakened a momentary longing, but he could not sustain it. Perhaps the flight would give them new hope, put back the missing part of the puzzle their life had become.

They strapped themselves in and waited for the stewardesses to attend to them. First there would be a meal, then a message from the promoters of the offer on their personal videos. They did not know where there were exactly, as the windows of the van that had brought them to the plane had been black, though it is unlikely they could have seen much anyway.

Amanda was awed by the experience. Wasn't this the first time since early childhood she had seen anyone in the flesh besides him and Claire? She seemed not to trust her eyes, even to speak to the other children on board, though at one point she did reach out her hand to a boy and touch him gently, as if to confirm his reality. But her shyness was no great problem as the other children were already mostly immersed in video games.

They ate better than they had in years. By the time the plane took off, they were completely relaxed. Nick felt a trickle of desire for Claire run through him and wished they were back in the flat.

Looking through their window he became aware of something extraordinary and sensed a buzz of animation pass from passenger to passenger as each in turn leaned to his window.

Flying parallel to them were an endless row of planes, only recognisable by a skeleton of illuminated windows framing other passengers' faces and mirroring those of Nick and Claire's fellow passengers. It was, Nick mused, as if those faces in their haloed panels defined the aircraft in which they were flying, as if the aircraft had no exterior bodies. Along with a momentary unease Nick felt a strange sense of balance, as if they were in the body of a huge bird.

They were finally distracted from their observation by an announcement on the video screens.

An avuncular man in a polo neck sweater under a check jacket appeared and introduced himself as Jack Manning. There was an aura of evangelical asceticism about his appearance, though all such organisations had long been outlawed.

He ran through the usual catalogue of the promoters' past successes, but the passengers' attention was only really arrested when he moved on to the purpose of this current promotion.

Their flight was not only special for reasons already mentioned but because they had all, with the exception of the accompanying children, been chosen. It had not been a random selection. They had something in common – they had all been outside before the Regulations.

There was nothing to fear, he added. They were taking part in a very special event, something quite unique.

"This is the last flight," the man intoned. "It is historic. You are not only witnessing the end of a particular evil, but taking part in a new movement. It is true that the mechanical age with all its wasteful consumption of the earth's

natural resources and pollution of what little remains began decades ago, but now, with the advent of the new transporters, we will be able at last to make contact with each other as normal beings, and not scrambled images. This is the government's master plan."

The man's oratory, for all its bombast, reminded Nick of old-fashioned salesmen's talk. Then he realised the darker import of what Manning was saying.

"You will soon be approaching what was once known as Heathrow Airport. It was the hub of world air traffic."

Nick could dimly make out the neglected airport below. Clouds started to clear as the planes descended to a level at which they seemed to be circling the airport in one giant wheel of concentric flight paths. Suddenly, one plane on the innermost circle of this metal whirlwind descended sharply and went into a dive.

"Those are our first missionaries. They will be hailed as heroes," said the voice over a video image of the plane seen from the ground.

Everyone realised instantaneously what it meant. They had been tricked into this propaganda stunt by the government, and they were being offered this as compensation – live coverage of their own glorious deaths. The government was putting paid irrevocably to the notion of anybody ever going out again, by decimating everyone tainted with having been out before. It was free advertising for their new transporters and the crushing of any campaign to clear up the mess outside.

There was not the expected panic on their plane, not even a whimper. Plane after plane descended and crashed into a circular area of white paint reminiscent of a huge target.

It took on new colours with each successive crash, first announcing itself as an abstract collage of metals, bodies, and objects, then went into a modernist Jackson Pollock phase, as human paint trailed from one end of the tarmac canvas to another and the pilots tried to outdo each other in their ambition.

The voice on the screen and a succession of montages of different angles constantly accompanied this art in the making. Their plane's wait had been one of the longest and they had witnessed every stage of this celebration until now, when it had reached the sculptural phase, forming a Tower of Babel heralding the dawning of the new era.

Its confusion of layers, the uncertainties of the nation's future, those resistant to the new vision had merged into one whole. Even those who did not agree with the new way would contribute bodily to it.

These messages, Nick reasoned, were partly explicit and partly implicit. By the time their plane started its descent everyone on board was chanting his praise and support for the new era. Except Nick and Claire.

As they approached the tip of the tower, Nick could see what was at the heart of this new movement. It was a sea of blood, and it was leaking from the base of this metal tree. Its roots were already too loose to give it sustenance.

Brian Howell *has had stories published in Panurge, Critical Quarterly, The Science of Sadness, and the two Darklands anthologies. He has just recently moved back to England from the Czech Republic.*

Ben Mitchell *is this issue's featured artist – see the front cover, page 15 and page 31. This is the first time his work has seen print. He is Scottish (but not very) and is currently studying Film and Video in Gwent.*

THE END OF THE ROAD

RHYS H. HUGHES

This is a long dark road for a weary music-student to be trudging up. And this is a heavy instrument to be balancing on thin shoulders. If only I played the piccolo instead of the double-bass. But now I am frozen in my tracks by a groan. A man is lying in a ditch by the side of the road. I am always polite. I lower my burden to the ground and sit down to talk to him.

His name, he tells me, is Marcel. He is in love. When I point out that love is scant reason for lying in a ditch, he replies that he was knocked there by an M.G. An M.G., furthermore, driven by the greatest beauty ever to swerve across a road. It was love at first strike. His bones are all broken, but it is his heart that aches. I am sympathetic. I offer him a cigarette. He declines on the grounds that they are bad for your health.

What am I to make of this last statement? As a poor student, tobacco is frequently an alternative to a meal rather than an adjunct. I remark that suppertime in my draughty garret is often a damp cigarette in front of my faulty paraffin-heater, with the single red head of a broken match to ignite both. At this, he adopts a dreamy tone. Redhead, yes, and her hair flowed out behind her like molten copper...

I have never seen copper, molten or otherwise, though once I had a brass monkey, so I ask if he managed to have a good look at her. Oh no! A glimpse is all he had. But it was enough. It seems to me that he is burning up with fancies. Love, of course, is an illusion. I decide to play him something to calm him down. I stand up, open my instrument-case, take out my double-bass and proceed to play a few notes of a dismal melody.

My hands are too cold to extract much worth. I apologise. Perhaps a cigarette will help to warm me? I fumble in my pockets. Five left; one every mile till my destination. My destination? The end of the road. I am to play my double-bass there at a soireé attended by various aesthetes. Yes, perhaps the M.G. was repairing thither when it knocked you head over heels into love and this ditch. She wore a silk scarf of the palest pink? Then she certainly sounds like an aesthete.

Naturally, I do not envy him. He is in love, it is true, but it is unrequited. His girl ditched him, in a manner of speaking. If I feel anything at all, then it is pity. But he does not want to be pitied. He insists that, for the first time in his life, he is happy. I am astonished. For only the first time? Yes, he has had a loveless existence. Like some grey, sad whale he has always wallowed in the seven seas of depression. But all that has changed now. It changed when the M.G. struck him down.

I am contemptuous. How could it? The woman he loves was a bad driver and a glimpse of red hair and pink scarf. Nothing more. But he insists that there is always more. Seeing is not always believing. We have already worked out that she is an aesthete and

can be found at the end of the road. Surely, with a little more effort, we should be capable of deducing exactly what she looks like, how the facets of her personality glitter, even what her name is. This is his argument.

As I said before, I am always polite. I wish to help him. I cannot turn back to summon help, nor can I carry him forwards to the end of the road. In the first case, I would lose sight of my destination; in the second, I would have to arrive without my double-bass. Yet there is one thing I can do.

I tell him that philosophy, like bad poetry, should be reserved for the college paper, and not declaimed aloud from a ditch. I tell him that ideals exist only in the mind or the liver, and very possibly do not exist at all. I tell him that, fantasy aside, he can name not a single one of her attributes and therefore cannot possibly be in love with her.

As a musician, I am used to developing themes. I dismantle his picture for him, piece by piece. He is a poor deluded fool, and I wish to bring him to his senses. I hammer the final nail into her coffin. I tell him that she must have been exceptionally vacuous not to have realised that she had been the cause of an accident.

At this, he begins to laugh. I have obviously misunderstood. It was no accident. She drove into him deliberately. There can be no doubt about it. She altered her course as soon as she spotted him in the glare of her headlights.

I am astounded. I shake my head in bewilderment. I can do no more for him. How can I reason with such? My conscience is clear. I return my double-bass to my long-suffering shoulders, bid him farewell and resume my journey towards the end of the road. As I walk, his final words ring in my ears.

Deliberately?

My step is not so heavy now. I am eager to reach my destination. I begin to increase my pace. Although this is a long dark road for a weary music-student to be trudging up, I am content. Although this is a heavy instrument to be balancing on thin shoulders, I am happy. My heart flutters like a trapped butterfly. His final words have had a profound effect on me. At the end of the road, if he has spoken truly, she will be waiting with pink scarf and molten copper hair. At the end of the road, I will find the woman I love.

***Rhys Hughes** is a 27 year-old electronic engineer whose hobbies include the usual melange of climbing, juggling, real ale, chess, cooking, travelling...*

DOPPELGANGER

JOHN BENSON & TINA REIGEL

(After HF Heard)

If I let you cease to be
A mental fancy,
A shadow I project
Then make vanish,
You will want a separate life.

Then you, the spider to my fly,
Will try to suck me empty.
If you touch me,
You'll become real
And I'll fade away.

But if I keep my head,
Learn how to stay still
And maintain my distance,
My nerve will make you balk.

And you'll remain
Little more than an irksome
Appendage to my will.

ANESTHESIA MAN

BRUCE BOSTON

By the time they clamp the transparent plastic mask across his face, the intravenous injection has done its work. He is floating away. He is already dreaming. And in his dream, he is crossing a land he has never seen.

He has become an anonymous hobo traveling with other hoboes... riding the rails... hopping the fast freights and the slow freights. He is living life on the run as he always lived it, only it is a different run and a far different life than he has ever known before.

Sometimes the tracks parallel the highway and he can see the cars and trucks and gas stations, the billboards and mass-food eateries, the towns and cities, all that he expects to see, sweeping by over and again. Then the tracks branch from the path of the highway, shooting off on their own into the wilderness to a less soiled country, green and inviting, a mountainous land of untouched forests and streams where the trout abound and the waters run clean.

It isn't a bad life except for the dirt and the hunger, except for the railroad bulls who gang up on them in the yards, catch them singly or in pairs and beat them with long wooden truncheons until they are bruised and senseless. It is a life without boundaries or rules except for the occasional overnight incarceration in the stained concrete cell of some backwater jail.

Whenever he grows tired of traveling or his belly is grumbling, he stops to eat and bed down at the bo camps stretched along the tracks in the wilderness, to sit around the crackling flames of an open fire or the meager heat of a Sterno can, to swap stories, pass a bottle, smoke hand-rolled cigarettes and pick up on news of where the trains are headed. California is his ultimate destination, not the California he knows in real life, but a California that exists only in this dream, the promised land as it was once promoted and envisioned.

Try as he might, he can't seem to get there.

News of the freight routings is always undependable and contradictory. He winds up crossing much of the same country over and over without ever making any sure progress to the West... and all the time the number of hoboes seems to be growing larger and the bo camps increasing in size. He plans to abandon this itinerant life once he reaches California, he plans to return to school, to stake his claim and mine a fortune in gold, to find a job in the booming aerospace industry, to eat oranges and dive into a hot tub every evening at dusk as the ocean crashes against an iridescent shore and the setting sun bleeds across the horizon over and again like a renewable virgin.

There are others like himself, trying to reach California. There are still others trying to get back to different states, back to their homelands and their families. But most of the men along the line believe this is nonsense.

They tell him he's too old to go back to school, that the gold has already been mined and stolen, the aerospace industry long since dead, that the blood of the setting sun is flush with carbon and delusion. They claim that they have all traveled far too many miles to return to anything. They believe that traveling is all there is for any of them and all there can ever be, that the miles of life on the run must eventually lead to death on the run. The spikes in the clacking tracks beneath our heels, they shout to him above the clacking of the tracks beneath their heels, are no more than the ten-penny nails of our collective coffins.

At one of the camp stops he discovers a dogeared booklet of train schedules buried at the bottom of his duffel bag. He tries to make some sense out of the booklet, but he can't. The date on the inside of the cover is in a long string of Roman numerals, and no matter how many times or ways he tries to add them up, the sum never comes out the same. He asks one of the hoboes sitting next to him at the fire to help, a tall lanky raw-boned fellow, no older than himself—however old that is by now—but with rheumy eyes and a sallow complexion. This dissolute youthman informs him that his booklet is out of date, and then produces his own booklet of train schedules.

The second book is in better condition than the first, the cover cleaner and all of the pages intact, but other than that it is identical. Yet no matter how many times he points out the similarities between the two schedules, it is impossible to make the fellow understand that they are the same. The man's face changes and becomes angry. It is like the grizzled face of his father suddenly drunk on cheap red wine. It is his father drunk on red wine and he takes it as a personal affront that his son should question him in any way. He knows life and he may have a few under his belt, but "for God's sakes" he knows his train schedules. Just as the argument between them explodes into ready curses, just as it is about to erupt into deadly familial violence long repressed, word comes rustling through the camp that there is a freight on its way, headed straight through to California.

He is running for the tracks with hundreds of other men running by his side. Those who stumble and fall underfoot are trampled by the stampede. Those who are sure enough and fleet enough manage to catch the open box cars on the fly and leap inside. The train is hundreds of cars long, but there are so many hoboes they are soon packed as tightly as sides of beef. They must stand shoulder to shoulder, their bodies swaying against one another as the train rocks to and fro.

They travel all day and into the night without stopping. They pass through country that none of the men have ever seen before, more and more barren. Judging from the position of the sun, they are traveling north rather than to the West. It grows progressively colder. By morning light they are still moving, passing over gray tundra-like plains that stretch out from the tracks in both directions to the limits of their vision.

Nearing afternoon, the train finally begins to brake, the heavy forward momentum of its hundreds of cars grinding slowly to a halt.

Looking out of the open boxcar he can see a massive railroad yard up ahead, with more trains and sidings than ever he knew existed. It is the biggest railroad yard of all, known in bo legend as 'The Hub', the place where all tracks and all trains come together, where all hobo lives converge.

In the near distance he can make out squadrons of blue-suited yard bulls,

hauling the hoboes in their shabby clothes off the arriving cars and processing them, marching them in lines and clipping metal tags around their necks. He knows that he cannot let himself be taken so he forces his way through the packed bodies to the open door and leaps from the car.

Several bulls, spotting his attempt to escape, break from the ranks ahead and begin chasing him along the sidings, in and out of a maze of corrugated metal shacks, clanking their wooden truncheons against the tracks, against the train's wheels, against the rumpled tin walls. The noise is deafening. It is the clacking of the rails magnified a thousand times and with no discernible pattern. It screams within his skull like...

But wait... he thinks... this is only a dream... he is not a hobo... he is an account executive for Fenner and Pierce. He is married with two children in illegal day care. His wife is a computer programmer who works only a few blocks away. They already live in California. They own their own home and their own hot tub. They already have the gold with more on the way. Sometimes he despises her with a chill intensity he could never begin to explain.

The bulls are coming closer and he is searching frantically for someplace to hide. He finds a boxcar on a deserted siding and climbs within, yanking with all of his strength to force the door shut behind him. It is a refrigerator car and he has somehow activated the cooling mechanism. It grows even colder than before. The door of the car is jammed. He pounds upon it but there is no answer. It grows colder and colder still. The sweat from his exertions begins to run down his face, his sides, and freezes upon his body in thin icicles that break and quickly reform with each of his movements. He pounds upon the door until his hands are raw and bloody but still there is no answer. His hands are so numb he can no longer feel any pain. The blood upon his fingers and knuckles freezes. His limbs stiffen until he can no longer move.

Although the refrigerator car stood abandoned on a siding, attached to no visible engine when he entered, it now begins to move. Not in the way a train normally moves, but soundlessly, effortlessly, as if it had left the clacking tracks behind, levitated, and were floating through the air. He stands in the center of the car like a statue. All sense has left his body, but his mind continues to turn in thoughts so slow their conclusions can be measured in years rather than seconds. The car sails on in a silence broken only by the wail of a hollow wind that may not be a wind at all but only the faint bellows of his failing lungs. His beard grows steadily longer, rimmed with ice. His clothes rot and fall away in tatters from his body until he is...

But wait... he thinks... this is only a dream... he is not a naked man who stands motionless in a locked refrigerator car sailing through the sky... he is a gay pharmacist who came out of the closet too late. He has to pay alimony to a woman who blames him for ruining her life. He has a second mortgage on a house in which he can no longer live. He's been making the bar scene for so many years he is probably HIV positive but has never summoned the courage to take the test and find out for sure.

The door of the car clanks open and he stumbles into the midst of a blindingly white landscape. The car stands alone in the desolation. Either there are no tracks or they have been totally obscured by the snow and ice that stretches in every direction. The sun seems very distant, small and bloodless. The sun hangs low but makes no move toward setting or rising. Instead its

motion is like that of a clock, round and around the horizon, the dim light it imparts to the featureless landscape never changing, the warmth it offers so insignificant that the subzero temperature never varies by more than a few degrees.

He can tell by the white hair that covers his body he is now an old man, and although he cannot see himself he imagines his face is like the grizzled face of his dead father, only blander than his father's face, lacking the torrents of sorrow and bewilderment, the lines of despair that etched that face and granted it a sure if unenviable...

But wait... he thinks... this is only a dream... he is not a naked old man standing alone in the midst of a barren Arctic landscape... he is a freelance expert in desktop publishing who owns his own condominium and plays the market on the side. He is single and plans to stay that way. On moonless nights when the Santa Ana's are blowing he cruises the Valley with the top down searching out his victims. A careful and deliberate maniac, he has committed no more than a dozen rapes and murders in half as many years.

At first there is only a faint thunder in the distance and a thin black line on the horizon. Not the dark cloud of an approaching storm, for as the line grows closer it thickens and widens, stretching out to the sides seemingly without end, but still clinging to the ground. The rolling thunder differentiates into the individual pounding of thousands upon thousands of hooves against the tundra. A stampeding herd of massive animals is rushing down upon him. He can see their steaming nostrils, the blazing pinpricks of their eyes, the broad humps of their shaggy backs. They are bison, not the docile bison he has seen nibbling bales of hay at the zoo, but huge untamed creatures resurrected from some primeval past. Behind them a cloudy spray of ice crystals fumes into the sky from the force of their passage.

This time there can be no escape. Surely he will be trampled to death underfoot and trampled again and again until nothing recognizable remains of him, nothing more than a shapeless bloody stain impressed upon the ice. As the beasts quickly loom upon him and surround him on all sides, they begin striking the boxcar head on. Scores of them die in the process but the speed of their headlong rush does not diminish. The car topples onto its side and is crushed by the weight of the racing animals as they continue their flight over the fallen dead.

With a skill born of desperation, an acrobatic grace torn from some ancient racial memory impacted in his cells, he grabs the horns of one animal and swings atop its back. Despite the cold he can smell the rank wet odor of its...

But wait... he thinks... this is only a dream... a dream no more distant than California... no more or less real than a virgin sunset... a dream as true as the icy floes that clog the aorta and ventricles of his wasted heart. He is a naked man riding a prehistoric abnormity into the blank stare of a featureless landscape. He is a creature of habit and indifference. The iridescent dust that fills the rafters of his soul is flush with carbon and delusion.

His body begins to merge with the body of the animal running beneath him. His mind empties itself of thought and reason and they race on together, man and beast as one, into a pure white light of death or enlightenment. The flat horizon continues to recede. From somewhere comes the steady click of slender knives.

***Bruce Boston**'s new novel 'Stained Glass Rain' is available in the UK from Cold Tonnage Books, 136 New Road, Bedfont, Feltham, Middlesex, TW14 8HT.*

CUT FLOWERS

KIMBERLEY PADGETT-CLARKE

Izzie had always wanted to die young. You might say it had been an ambition of hers.

I find myself in her room again. Well, it's my room actually, my house. But this room is undoubtedly hers. I can still smell her in here. The sweet sickly smell of some godawful perfume she used to wear still hangs heavy in the air. I never did find out the name of it. I never found out her name either. Not her real name anyway.

"Isadore. Call me Izzie. That's all you need to know," she had stated matter of factly that first night. I suspected she had taken the name from Isadore Duncan. Another of her young dead heroes.

God this place is such a mess. Going into Izzie's room is like picking your way through a minefield. Clothes, record sleeves, brimming ashtrays and empty diet coke cans are discarded on the floor with a nonchalance so typical of this generation. Everything is just the way she left it. That way, I can still believe she may come back one day and tidy it all up. Fat chance!

I can't deny that it had been very flattering to be chatted up by such a beautiful young girl. She had been wearing black flared trousers and impossibly high platform shoes. I had made some flippant remark about the sixties making a comeback but she didn't take offence, quite the contrary. "Tell me about the sixties," she flirted outrageously, toying with the huge wooden cross hanging round her neck, "I really need to know." Her long fingers wrapped around my thigh and she squeezed hard. The look in her eyes was so intense, so all consuming. It frightened and excited me. She left me mentally exhausted. I hadn't thought about the sixties for nearly thirty years. She wanted to know everything, the whole psychedelic experience. She asked me if I had done drugs in those days, and she seemed quite impressed when I told her I had dabbled. By the time I got round to telling her that I had briefly known Brian Jones, Izzie was mine, body and soul.

She wouldn't move into my bedroom but insisted on having her own room right from the start. We became like a pair of clandestine lovers sneaking into each other's rooms. She hated making love in my room. She said it was too conventional, too straight. She would pout and plead until I gave in and left the sanctuary of my room for the total chaos of hers.

The joss sticks always made my eyes water, the smell of that awful perfume competing with a hundred dead cigarette ends made me feel sick. Pictures of dead rock stars grinned at me from every corner of her room. We made love to a constant backdrop of Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison and Marc Bolan. The singers always had to be dead. She said it gave the music more poignancy, more meaning. Voices that no longer existed. She patiently explained like a mother to a naive child, that young dead singers were like

freshly cut flowers, taken in their prime before they had a chance to wither. Jimi Hendrix in particular had the strangest effect on Izzie. In the middle of lovemaking, she would stop and shiver violently and look right through me as if I didn't exist. It scared the hell out of me.

I thought I would be used to death by now. Funny really, how you can detach yourself from it just because it's a part of your job. The corpses I work on every day don't count really. They are not people, I haven't known them. I slap on the powder and paint for the sake of those still living. Ridiculous really, but death has to be presentable to be acceptable.

Izzie's face flashes through my mind again, the last time I saw her. It's being in this damn room. I know I shouldn't come in here. If I had any sense, any sanity left, I would seal this room up forever. Everything in it would become a shrine to Izzie, just like one of her dead rock stars. She would appreciate the irony in that.

Something stabs into the sole of my foot. I curse myself. How stupid to enter this room in stocking feet. I lift my foot up. Stuck to the bottom of my sensible grey sock is a tie-pin in the shape of a cannabis leaf. It was supposed to be my birthday present. Izzie had spent all day scouring her favourite hippy shops looking for just the right thing. She said it made me look less respectable. She even suggested I wear it at work and give the dead something to smile about. I drew the line there and we ended up having a huge row. I spent the night in my 'sensible' bedroom listening to the wailings of Jimi Hendrix's guitar drifting from her room.

There had been a flu epidemic shortly after, that had taken quite a few old people with it. It felt like most of them had ended up at my mortuary. It wasn't hard work, no accident victims with faces like burst melons to turn into something fit for a relative to view, but the sheer volume of bodies left me physically exhausted at the end of the day. There was no chance of returning home to a roaring fire, a cooked meal, the cat by the hearth and my slippers gently warming at the side. By early evening Izzie was so spaced out that I might as well have been the ghost of Jacob Marley drifting into her room, rattling my chains and pointing out the error of her ways. Suddenly, the age difference between us was becoming less of a fascination to her and more of a handicap. We were drifting apart.

So it came as a surprise when she suggested a romantic weekend in Paris. The city seemed to really excite her. Her beautiful almond eyes were alive again. She began to look like the vibrant young girl I had fallen in love with. The admiring glances I drew from Parisienne men in street cafés did a great deal to mend an ego which until recently had taken some battering.

I felt confident again—no, invincible. This was my territory, things were back on my terms. I laid Izzie down on clean sheets, her long chestnut hair fanned out on a snowy white pillow. No clutter and chaos, no dead rock stars, just the faint strains of a French love ballad drifting through the open window from a café by the hotel. I thought I was getting through to her.

I thought I was showing her a different side to life, something to balance out her darker side. I almost believed that she trusted me.

On our last day she had been like a kid who can't wait for Christmas. She had woken me at 6.30am with a cup of black coffee and a croissant. She sat crosslegged on the end of the bed, her beautiful long hair scraped back into a ponytail and shoved roughly underneath a floppy brimmed black hat. The many crosses and pendants around her

neck and the hundreds of thin silver bangles on each arm jangled and rattled as she babbled on at me, her arms windmilling. I'd hardly swallowed the last mouthful of croissant before she was pulling me roughly from the sanctuary of the crisp white hotel sheets. She wanted to take me somewhere, show me something really important. She wouldn't say what it was. It was another surprise.

We caught a local bus and she prattled at the driver in her best schoolbook French. She grew increasingly quiet as the bus wound its way out of the city itself and into the suburbs. I stopped asking her where we were heading. I didn't like the haunted look in her eyes when she turned to face me.

As the cemetery came into view I felt myself groan. She hit me on the arm then smiled nervously as if she had intended the slap to be playful. But her eyes said otherwise.

As we left the bus she grabbed my hand and led me through the regimental rows of marble and stone monuments to the dead. I muttered something about this turning out to be a busman's holiday, but the humour was lost on her.

Suddenly she threw my hand away as if discarding an old glove. Izzie was swallowed up by a crowd of young people who sat or sprawled around the edge of a small rather plain-looking grave. I held back and apologised for treading on Francoise Lanoire, who had died only last year, aged 47. My age.

I had to admire Jim Morrison. In life he had seemed to me to be somewhat mediocre. A good looking young man who writhed around the stage, mumbling incoherently into a microphone to an audience even more stoned than he was. But in death he had become immortal. A hero to a generation not yet born.

I watched as Izzie picked her way delicately through his legion of admirers. Her fingertips caressed the brass plate, lovingly tracing the letters of his name, and for the only time in my life I envied the dead.

Izzie sat down and a young man passed her a joint. She pulled on it, head tilted back, eyes closed. The young man took a good long look at her breasts. She passed the joint back to him. The moment was so intimate. I felt like an intruder. She didn't notice me leave.

Oh, but she looks so beautiful now. An island of calm in her chaotic room. The dark wood of her favourite cross stands out in stark contrast against the creamy whiteness of her skin. I've wrapped her fingers around the ends of it, clutching it in repose. The long black dress and the cross make her look like a religious Icon. Only her hair spread seductively across the pillow and her bright red lipstick break the illusion.

I'm so glad she chose suicide by pills. Slashing her wrists would have been more dramatic but would have made a terrible mess.

I touch her face, as if to waken her from a deep sleep. The make-up is holding up remarkably well.

I've done my best and poured my love for her into my skills. She deserved that at the very least. But I am no magician, no miracle worker. The illusion of her beauty will be short lived.

Even I can't stop cut flowers from dying.

Kim Padgett-Clarke *lives and works in Blackpool. She has had over 30 short stories published before now, but this story marks a significant change in direction for her.*

John Benson & Tina Reigel *(see 'Doppelganger') are the editor and assistant editor of the acclaimed US magazine 'Not One Of Us', $5 from 44 Shady Lane, Storrs, CT 06268, USA.*

THRID SHIFT

PAUL PINN

With muted breath, flesh in rags flash eyes acutely aware. Flesh and rags pull closer, their hopelessness uncomfortably bare. Paladins scan these tramps and hags, catch gleams of intelligence in the eyes of the decimated faces behind the filthy hanging hair. Feeling uneasy they move on, leaving the huddled damned behind as they enter a crumbling labyrinth smelling of every foul odour imaginable, and a few far removed from the imagination. With a rapid studiousness born of disciplined training they cautiously inspect a flux of ill-lit alleys that rush at them from all directions.

Dark unformed shapes move swiftly across penumbral edges, fending off dull glows draining from rectangular yellow lights hanging watchful from stunted stalks of stone. A web-woven silence stifles with its eerie gloom, perhaps presaging things the paladins would rather not know. It smothers any wish they may have to produce a sound and acknowledge the existence of something more than just the rustle of decay, the whisper of death, the anxious heartbeat of cruelty and fear. Their footfalls are silent, their thin mouths set grim. They cannot hear themselves breathe.

And then a tortured scream explodes in the ears of one of them, with such short speed and sharp intensity that he wonders if he imagined it. Second Leader notes that the others walk on without reaction, eyes left, eyes right, left again, right again. The stillness beckons them on. The alleys hug their secrets like dark mouths. They peer down each one but see nothing except the occasional glimpse of... they can never be sure.

For those that live in the labyrinth, the alleys have snuffed out any sparks of observance; sparks that may shatter the hollowness within their folds of blackness: a blackness that eases their burden of having too many years and no means to fulfil the obligations of their dreams. If the tramps had mirrors, thinks Second Leader, would they soon destroy them? He wonders if they destroy each other when their pain becomes intolerable; or does it bind them closer together?

Down, down they walk into the stinking core of this forgotten catacomb, this unexplored maze of utter despair. The stench of necrobiosis fills their mouths like someone else's vomit. Two of the squad put on filter-vents, awkward masks that cut down vision and labour the breathing. First Leader turns to the others, holds up one finger, points ahead then to his nose. One hour more and fresh air. They've forgotten what fresh air smells like.

They continue, weapons slung too casually but their eyes very alert. They notice that the floor is devoid of rubbish, with not even a scrap of paper, a curl of plastic, a crumb or dead insect; only concrete coated in dark olive filth and puddles of contaminated water. Broken lights become frequent. Total blackness is soon reached.

They switch on helmet lamps, the sudden brightness stark and penetrative, scratching at the concrete, diving into the yellow slime on the walls. Second Leader feels that he can almost see the stench hovering in the light like wisps of smoke. He touches his filter-vent for reassurance, more interested in his ability to withstand the fetor without recourse to the mask.

As the descent grows deeper they shine their lamps down the alleys, curious to see what they hold, but their blackness is so total that the light barely travels forward for more than a few paces. The slope of the tunnel they travel flattens out, curves then rises. Soon they will emerge from the cliff-face that towers above the eastern side of the city like a forbidding wall of impenetrable rock built by a giant. As they ascend the air freshens. They walk quickly, eager to be gone. They grow careless with their new enthusiasm, hardly glancing at the tramps and hags lining the approach, as they line every entrance and exit, living on the periphery of the labyrinth in order, it is assumed, to maintain a balance in their lives between light and dark, life and death.

The paladins' emergence is almost a surprise. No opaque glow strengthening slowly, just a blast of fresh air into their lungs and a breeze slapping their faces. Then the sight of the spangled city glinting in the after-dusk. They stare down, across and up, mindful of the unknown dangers that lurk behind them, thankful for the sight of sequined columns tickling the belly of the moon, itself almost dwarfed by another giant's wall opposite them.

They press on, across crumbling walkways born of gutter planning and littered with the crude detritus of exhausted techno-masochism. When these stark concrete fingers were first built – so long ago that the year is lost – they were hailed as an imaginative innovation, convenient and well-lit, suggestive of good crowd control management. Now they are aerial eyesores and the city waits for their spindly metal legs to weaken and snap.

They progress along a third finger, complacent within the familiar, not evaluating immediately the sudden changes: pockets of darkness where there had been illumination; strange rubied flashes in the leaden sky; a plastic scent hugging the air; the distant wail of sirens and the gentle touch of tremors. Above all else it is cold, and in the coldness of the night there is a hollow ringing. This they hear, and only then do they see, and smell, and *feel.*

With the exception of the First Leader moving point (as the holder of such a privileged position is always expected to) and the Second Leader trailing (for it pays to be watchful) the paladins glance continuously at each other as they descend to ground level and connect with the streets expecting mayhem. Surprisingly they appear empty, as if the city has been evacuated. Cadaverous metal hulks gleam fulvous-argent as drizzle falls like acid vapour. Sidewalks and asphalt suggest liquid density where none exist. Structures with square eyes darkened by dreams and built by mortals for the worship of greater aspirations stand like sentinels from an aeon long gone but still not buried in history.

First Leader stops abruptly and they take up positions behind him, their weapons no longer slung casually from their shoulders. They stare back at the secret eyes of the past, ready to blind if necessary. First Leader listens to a Palace Transmission in his helmet radio. He turns and orders them back to the labyrinth. As usual he gives no explanation, not even to Second Leader; and as usual all obey and ask no questions.

Suddenly a twisted scream pierces the nerves of the city. And is ignored. It is a scream impossible to identify the source off, and the paladins hurry on for it is too close for them to want involvement.

From the sky fall two mangled bodies. They land in front of First Leader with a sound like breaking eggs, splattering his boots and black combats with rich blood. He halts and all look up, then around and down, their nerves one with the city. They acknowledge something more than just a slow drastic change: they acknowledge the Shift. And with the Shift comes fear. The fear once felt by ancestors, and now drying the mouths of the élite paladins of the Guard of the Ruling Committee; a fear that mocks their previously held apathy to the quasi-religious theories of the Shift.

Across the street a ghostly shadow walks through a battered steel door. Vented muzzles point, trigger fingers tighten, First Leader beckons.

They resume walking, retracing their steps. Light the colour of bile splashes over a junk-fiend lost in a temporary entertainment amidst the remains of a dream that has never been realized. They pause, watch the wretched figure unravel lengths of wire and tubing from the shattered fuselage of a flying machine that, like all of them, never made it beyond take-off. Wounds striate his pale flesh and drip truth oven-fresh. Soon he will die with the agony of a million dawns.

Graffiti is scribbled on the firmament, confused reflections with a waft of bloody sewage. Static crackles eerily between the towers, each of the ten thousand square eyes blinking ruefully.

It is the Shift. A rupture of vessels. A rupture of worlds. A temporal leakage. Natural. Unnatural. Proof. Proof of nothing. The Shift is all things to all citizens.

As the paladins walk, Second Leader occupies himself with matters that the Ruling Committee regard as trivial, even treacherous. Will I live or die? What should I fear more, the Shift or the labyrinth? Do I care? Should I care? These questions are not his alone.

They recross the walkways and confront the cliff. It reflects nothing of the Shift, stays aloof, a power unto itself. They look back at the city. It still sparkles but its jewelled presence is fragmenting. Something invisible and brazen is mincing the gems, scattering and smothering at random. They turn away not wishing to see more, and enter the labyrinth.

Fangs, claws, snarls: at first sight Second Leader thinks it a dog moving at his heels, but a second look confirms that it is not. And of course it wouldn't be, not here in the labyrinth. The dog is a tramp. There now seems to be many more than before. Second Leader watches them carefully as he moves and with muted breath, their flesh in rags, they flash eyes acutely aware. The tramps pull themselves close to their hags.

Down, down the paladins walk, the stench of the core filling their noses, their mouths, forcing its way down their throats and curdling their stomachs. The main tunnel will soon level and curve and return to the eastern cliff-face as if some secret rock-hidden barrier exists within the core, but before it does they stop to put on filter-vents, Second Leader sensing something behind him and turning. They are being followed silently not only by the tramps but also their hags. They stop a short distance away from Second Leader, the tramps licking their lips, hungry in some unknown anticipation. First Leader shouts out and Second Leader looks in his direction, unsure of what he said, the words muffled, stifled. Lamps explode stark light and Second Leader clicks his on.

More tramps block their passage and others approach from the dark alleys that join the main tunnel. Second Leader turns back to those behind him in time to hear the hags mutter excitedly. He catches a few words, tightens his grip on his gun and thinks of the deserter they have been searching half-heartedly for.

First Leader barks out his rank. "What are they saying?" he shouts.

"They're looking forward to the smell of roasting meat," Second Leader shouts as blades flash up and down.

First Leader falls without sound, viciously precise arcs slashing his combats, slashing his flesh. Second Leader glances the other way, alarmed by his own possible death, but is surprised to see the tramps and their hags standing motionless. Unarmed. The other paladins jerk and sway in undecided little gestures, their weapons useless in such a confined space unless they wish to shoot each other. They switch their confused attention to the alleys but those spawned by the dark mouths stand impassively, only their bloodshot eyes moving.

First Leader lies still, blood the colour of dully glowing oil staining his combats. The bloody blades have vanished and the assassins, as still as the body before them, regard the paladins with curious stares, the light a jaundice upon all their features.

Second Leader fingers his weapon nervously. Under Military Decree he is now in command and would be justified in giving the order for the annihilation of the tramps and their hags and anyone or anything else that lives in the labyrinth; yet he does nothing but stare at them. And those now under his command stare at him, a strange gleam in their eyes, as if the First Leader's death is more than just an opportunity for slaughter, more even than an unexpected watershed.

The tramps and hags back away. Second Leader shakes his head, removes his filter-vent and feels sick as the stench leeches the clean air from his lungs. Those in the alleys to the left and right disappear into the blackness, those near the First Leader drag his body away, leaving his weapon, their eyes never leaving the paladins. Those that followed move back, drift away, no longer interested. The paladins stand alone, ghastly yellow in the salivating concrete that binds the stench. Second Leader is conscious of the others waiting for him to say something. He replaces the filter-vent over his face, thinking quickly. When he talks his voice sounds muffled, as if his mouth is gagged. "We go back," he repeats.

The reaction to his order is curious. The strange gleam in the eyes of the paladins reappears. He switches the radio in his helmet to standby but does nothing more, for the cliff swallows transmissions as it swallows the dispossessed of the city.

Without appointing a trailer he leads his men back without hindrance, until the cliff is behind them and the concrete walkways before them. Broken. With their spindly metal legs snapped and buckled, their spines of gravel and cement end in mid-air or lie like monstrous slug trails on the ground far, far below them.

Beyond, the city is scarred by hot crimson bolts and hairy with electrically-hued swirling clouds, but there is more darkness within its grid of streets than ever before.

In silence they watch a skyscraper fall away from the belly of the moon, snap in its middle and crash on to the buildings beneath it. Shattered glass erupts like an explosion of rubies, a shower of blood. They barely hear it, barely feel the impact. Perhaps they don't; perhaps they only sense the rapid beating of their hearts.

The Shift captivates them. Soon it will end, leaving a few buildings, pockets of survivors, patches of earth not burned entirely black. And the city will be rebuilt. Then destroyed again. Then rebuilt. Destroyed. Rebuilt. Until perfection of society is reached. Or so say the members and appointees of the Ruling Committee. But everyone knows that no one really knows anything about the Shift. It is a convenient enigma, a tool, an excuse.

As the Shift destroys, Second Leader is struck suddenly by the futility of life in the city, the blue funk of the Ruling Committee who rather than having reached out for answers had instead huddled in their coldly functional meeting rooms and weaved laws and etiquettes from the memories and menace of the Shift. Had laid down parameters to govern the movement and development of society, parameters explained in countless words on countless pieces of paper and enforced by the élite Guard of the Ruling Committee, élite because of the paladins' adequate intelligence and controllable attitudes, and an inbred overwhelming sense of loyalty. But individuality can often know no parameters.

Second Leader glances up at the cliff behind him. Parameters of ink and paper are nothing compared to the impregnable parameters of the enormous cliffs that except for one side surround the city. He glances to his right, north, the open side that leads into a long valley that spreads slowly, the cliffs always following. It appears that ultimately it will lead to a vast openness beyond the imaginations of all, the cliffs curving away into the distance and disappearing. He grimaces at a memory. He knows the empty vista is eventually filled with a final cliff.

What is on and beyond the cliffs? he wonders. Were the walkways and the labyrinth an attempt by our forefathers to find out? He cranes his neck and looks up and round, sensing their formidableness, their absoluteness. The hard black rock that reflects nothing seems to threaten him, to suggest that his thoughts would be better placed elsewhere.

"Daunting, aren't they?" whispers a voice in his ear.

He turns, lifting his weapon. A gloved hand slaps back the barrel, keeps it firmly against his chest. It is another paladin, the one they have been looking for, the deserter. His face is unshaven, his combats crumpled, his weapon slung casually from his shoulder. His expression shows no fear.

"Had you the courage to ignore Military Decree and investigate those alleys that lead off from the main tunnel, you would have discovered that some of their ceilings grow higher until beyond the reach of hands. But before that, you would have seen large holes in the ceilings. Holes that are the beginnings of other tunnels that travel upwards."

For a moment the implication of what he has said doesn't sink in, only his voice, calm and very assured.

"For some reason the tramps do not have the inclination to venture into those holes, or if they did, the strength to climb them. I do. As do you and your men."

Second Leader looks at the black rock behind him. Then looks up. And up. Until he thinks he might fall backwards. "It is possible?"

"Those that lived long before us carved the tunnels. Within them there are ledges full of their relics. I have seen no human bones."

Second Leader narrows his eyes warily. "How did you manage if the tunnels are vertical?"

"They have indents all the way up. Or at least as far as I ventured."

"The tramps did not prevent you?"

"No."

"And why did you not reach the top?"

"I am short of rations, but have smelt the air. It is unlike anything you have smelt. It is pure, a food in itself, but alas, not food enough," and he smiles the smile of an old friend.

"We each have rations for a week. How long to the top?"

"I stopped after only one day. I think two days will do it."

Second Leader looks back at the city, its rubific evisceration lighting the sky. It dances to the tune of a tremor, its lights blinking out one by one as the Shift sucks it apart. There is no hope there now, or will there be later.

"There is nowhere for you to go," says the deserter looking down at the smashed walkways, "except back inside and up to the top."

"To what?"

He shrugs. "Can it be worse than rebuilding the city and reliving the past? Or living with the tramps?"

"A new future can be built." And then in a whisper: "Without the Ruling Committee."

"To be destroyed by the Shift?"

"What if the Shift also destroys what is on and beyond the cliffs?"

"There is only one way to find out. If you do not wish to come with me, at least give me rations so that I can accomplish what I must do."

Second Leader scrutinizes his pale face, peers into his reddened eyes, still a little uncertain. The man is a deserter. Once he was also a comrade. The enormity of the choice is as daunting as the Shift and the cliffs.

"The Ruling Committee are probably dead," says the deserter, "or at best hiding powerless under the ground like frightened grubs."

"You are sure about this?"

"Do not mock my intelligence. I am like you, moulded by their ways but not entirely without my own thoughts. Thoughts that, I hasten to remind you, are shared by many others within the Guard," and his eyes narrow, remembering past veiled conversations with Second Leader. He reinforces his point by glancing at the other paladins. "The Ruling Committee tried to mould us to their ways. They failed. Let us be true to ourselves."

Second Leader nods his head. The deserter is right. If he was not then they would have slaughtered the tramps and hags at the time of First Leader's murder. Even without an order from himself it would have been within the more extraordinary provisions of Military Decree for the paladins to have acted on their own initiative. But they didn't because... because First Leader was military and not like them. He had no thoughts of his own. And the tramps were hungry and Second Leader had felt something for them, and they in turn seemed to feel something for the paladins. The tramps had had the advantage in numbers and positioning, yet they hadn't capitalized on it. Why? Was it because they also had their own thoughts and recognized the signs?

"Who are the tramps?" Second Leader asks. "What were they before they came here?"

"Ask them that and they look at you with a great sadness in their eyes. And they never answer."

Second Leader regards his men who have been listening intently. He asks them what they want to do. At first they are hesitant, reluctant to speak. He presses them one by one, and one by one they agree to go back inside and up, up to the top and whatever waits for them there.

"Then let us go," snaps the deserter as he turns to lead the way.

They follow, into the cliff-face, into the labyrinth, Second Leader trailing. Tramps and hags line the passageway,

their faces upturned, their eyes acutely aware. Second Leader watches them closely, knowing that he would rather rebuild the city and relive the past than live as they do. Even the unknown horror of the Shift would be preferable to having the tumoured body of a starved dog with teeth like rotten bones and hair like melded mat.

A tramp mutters something about the paladins going to the holes. Second Leader strains his ears and catches something that sounds like a woeful tut. He assumes it is a sound of regret that they cannot follow the paladins' endeavour. As he nears the last of them his blood freezes with the words of a hag mumbling to her companion.

"They don't know we're the lucky ones returned from where they go."

His legs move of their own accord as he realizes that they were once like him; capable of climbing to the top.

"Only here can you escape the Shift," she continues, "only here."

As he passes her he sees her lick her shrivelled lips and start to chew on her companion's filthy nails. Warm liquid fills his crotch and trickles down the insides of his thighs. Only when a single word reverberates in his ears does he realize that he has screamed out 'NO' to those moving before him. The line of paladins stop and turn with weapons ready. The tramps and hags sit motionless and the paladins' stares become baleful when they see fear on Second Leader's face.

"No, no," he whispers, shaking his head, unable to elucidate. "No!"

The deserter attempts to move along the line but an arm shoots out and bars his way. He respects the gesture and stops. Second Leader falls to his knees and pulls off his helmet, banging it down on the concrete floor. He gazes up, his face older than his years. "There is no escape. It is futile." His voice is heavy, as heavy as the rock above them. "Others have done it before and failed. The proof is here before you," and he scans the expressionless faces of the tramps and hags. "They know."

"They know nothing," says the deserter.

"They know," repeats Second Leader. "I heard one mutter. They have seen and returned. The top is no escape from the Shift"

"The Shift does not last forever and the envy of the incapable should be no deterrent. Stay if you wish, it is of no consequence to us," and the deserter retraces his steps to the front of the line, the paladins turning to follow him.

Second Leader shouts at them as they move off. "You don't understand."

The last paladin glances back at him and smiles. And then they are gone in gloom and silence.

"Why didn't you say something?" he demands of the tramps and hags.

A tramp gargles saliva and scratches a wild beard, flicks a few strands of hair from his face and leans forward with contemptuous eyes and an ugly sneer. "What of you now, *pallor-din*?" The question draws rheumy cackling from the others. "Scared to go up," continues the tramp, "and unable to go back." He turns to the others. "Does this coward think he can thrid the labyrinth at our expanse?"

Second Leader moves off his knees and squats, his hands taking a military grip on his weapon, his heart thumping too loudly in his blood.

"Thridding, thridding, thridding," croaks a rocking hag with manic eyes. "To thrid with us one has to have paid the price."

Before Second Leader can stand, silver arcs flash and slash with practised ease.

***Paul Pinn** is a prolific writer. Not surprisingly, we already have another story of his lined up for a future issue.*

THE THIN MAN'S GUIDE TO SLIPSTREAM

by Allen Ashley

Have no sense of humour. Be po-faced, not Poe-faced.

Say, "Writing is not about the communication of ideas."

Say, "The hieroglyphs were all painted by Howard Carter as a prank following his non-admission into the Egyptian bath-houses."

Profess, "This is my moment of being. Plots are old hat. Only unenlightened readers who believe life has a beginning, middle and end want *stories.*"

Don't: admit to reading fairy tales, Roald Dahl or Charles Dickens to your children.

Think: I am guilty for all the failures of modern Western democracy.

Decide: The shared stasis of my psychology is more useful to the junkie beggar mother than the sweaty 10p in my palm.

Profess not to watch any soaps unless they're directed by David Lynch.

Lie about this last point.

Tell no one in your writers workshop that you secretly enjoy the re-runs of 'Star Trek'.

In the spirit of the new Europe, litter your work with untranslatable quotes from any language which produces its own postage stamps. Become au fait with *au fait*.

Call yourself Chris, Rick or Nick. If you're a woman make it Alysson with a 'why' or Deborah with an 'aura'. Better still become obscurely American and always lower case.

Feel good about yourself at least once a day.

Feel bad about yourself even when you're feeling good.

Believe plot is the prison of the pedant.

Sell all your Stephen King books to your younger brother.

Tell your mother you wish you and she were the last married couple left on Earth.

Practise literary descriptions of sunsets to the blind. Awake, England! Rise and shine!

Say, "The revolution will not be won in the hearts and minds of the British people but in our ability to hack our way from Mortal Kombat and Street-fighter II into the control systems of multi-national oppression."

Mean, "Stuff this writing for a lark, I'm gonna fiddle with my Game Boy for half an hour."

Read: Only the letters columns of genre magazines.

Take umbrage at something different each month.

Buy no paperbacks for fear of contributing to the puerile drip-feed of popular culture.

Claim to have studied the semiotic resonances of verb construction in 17th century Hippolytia. BC.

Secretly: Have skipped all your lectures and become a waiter in a Spanish tapas bar.

Wear: Doctor Martens at weddings, eyeshadow at conventions and your girlfriend's underpants in the bath.

Eat in post-nouvelle cuisine bars off Islington High Street. Drink urine coloured Mexican beer straight from the bottle. Order fried potato skins with no fillings. Take lashings of fricasséed celery for dessert.

In every 'story' you write name-check the music you dig.

Like cats.

State publicly, "You can't judge a book by its contents."

Wish: You were William Burroughs, JG Ballard or Jorge Luis Borges.

Wish: You had an American Express gold card.

Wish: You were twenty-one again. Months, that is.

Make your mantra: Writing is, writing is... with an occasional key-change to slipstream is, slipstream is...

Work at perfecting a style. Then reject it as being untruthful to the commonality of human experience.

Have a boring day job but invent an exciting, well-travelled past which critics will be unable to puncture.

Declaim, "God didn't put us on this Earth to worry about clear narrative, identifiable characters and themes of interest to educated readers."

Add: "God didn't put us on this Earth."

Ask: To be reincarnated as Nelson Mandela's toe nails.

Claim never to have watched breakfast TV, 'Prisoner Cell Block H' or 'Noel's House Party'.

Try to think in a foreign language.

Never tell anyone you took an axe to your word processor when the 'print' function repeatedly played up.

Realise: I don't need an editor, I need a therapist.

Write letters you're never going to post.

***Allen Ashley** would like it to be known that he considers himself a slipstream writer. Of sorts.*

TIGHTROPE WALKER

STEVE URWIN

armed with grief
and two bags of shopping,
trousers too short revealing
crusted navy socks, I walk behind
myself twenty years from now;
dirty anorak flapping in the breeze
shiny dome poking through chip-pan hair.
what am I thinking as deck-shoes
shuffle over grey blocks? do unborn
children's voices ring loud and clear
as my shape burns into the road?
or just the echo of a wife's laughter
still mocking this long after my departure?
armed with grief, a clown moves
slowly forward, spits onto the curb.
overtaking this balancing act I discover
no face, no body inside the shabby clothes.
strange air slips through the fibres
and travels the concrete wire
above the circus to which he's gone.

***Steve Urwin** has recently published a booklet of poems called Reflecting Hurt, which can be ordered from him for £2.50 inc p&p: 12 Derby Crescent, Moorside, Consett, Co. Durham DH8 8DZ.*

OTHER: PLEASE EXPLAIN

DON WEBB

It had been much easier than I had imagined getting my underground home. Once I explained to the city that I had purchased my own subway car and was willing to pay for a token for each visit to the car, it was merely a matter of having my car delivered to the roundhouse and coupled to the train. The city supplies electricity and of course there were no taxes. I outfitted my car with a tile fireplace, a Victorian wardrobe, a long red plush couch, a library of 500 volumes (each a leather-bound classic) in two mahogany bookcases, a writing desk, a bust of Pallas Athena, a television set, a water cooler, an oak chair, a recliner, a gilded bird cage, and a raven.

The first winter I had to leave my car to gather firewood. I got my share of odd looks as I would lock my door upon leaving. Christmas shopping crowds were particularly rude. The subway tunnels are perfectly warm in winter, but I like a roaring fire whilst I sip my brandy and pen my memoirs. I fortunately receive a pension from my espionage work—a matter so secret that even I cannot remember it. I enjoy the sight of anxious faces peering in my windows at each stop. All these people all going somewhere all full of worries. I raise my glass to them.

The television became an annoyance. Always full of upperworld strife. During my second winter I unplugged it and hurled it at a particularly rude crowd. The graffiti artists sometimes cover my windows, but I have become quite adept at cleaning them as the car rushes through the dark tunnel.

I have covered the steel floors at each end of my car with Astroturf and recently I added a plastic pot of silk flowers to my tiny patios. Sometimes I stand on them—with a tropical cocktail in hand—enjoying the rush of dark air.

There are other dwellers in the underdark. I glimpse their pale skins sometimes. A savage tribe living in constant warfare with the abandoned dogs who hunt in parks at night. Poverty drove their ancestors into the subway system — or perhaps they've always lived here and the system was just built around them. The system is longer than surface men know. You'd have to ride it all the time to discover the secret routes—the vast natural caverns, the lost mines, the dusty wine cellars, the underground rivers, the forgotten basements my car goes through. The underground grows every day; sometimes I feel that I am far from my city of origin, but I will return some day. Ride long enough and you'll come to your station.

As for my lifestyle, I would recommend it to anyone who needs a time and place of serenity. When I've seen enough anxious faces I pull down my shades and lay back on my overstuffed couch and dream of the *Nautilus.*

Don Webb has two chapbooks just out: 'The Seventh Day & After' from Wordcraft of Oregon, and 'The Bestseller & Other Tales' from Chris Drumm Books. He lives in Texas.

BREAK DOWN THE WALLS OF THE WORLD

STEVE ANTCZAK

At twenty till midnight she walked into the cafe wearing a Nazi SS leather longcoat and a black skullcap.

He sat at the back writing his cheap, angry, sexual poetry, and hated her before he even met her. She was everything he feared.

They met right there, in the cafe, in the middle of the angry, sexual, rotten and anything but cheap city. He was in the middle of a vulgar composition, 'The Big Suck', and she sat down right across from him, at his table, in a seat that had remained unoccupied for as long as he sat in the other one. They looked at each other, they stared, and *breathed.* He saw that she was white, had black hair, black lips, black eyes.

She saw him, black, bald, muscles in a tight T-shirt that asked, JESUS IS COMING, ARE YOU READY TO SWALLOW?

She was.

"Get. The. Fuck. Out. Of. Here."

She pulled out a cigarette, lit it, but she didn't blink or care that if he could get away with it, he would murder her.

She smiled; smoke blew his way from in between her thin lips. He had to grip the table to keep himself from punching her, slamming his fist into her face, that beautiful, erotic, white face. Porcelain. He wanted to destroy that, and all beauty.

"Do I have your attention?" she asked, spitting in the face of his anger.

Destroy.

They stared some more, and didn't breathe, and didn't think, except to think about each other. He thought her death, she his conversion.

"You want me," she said. "You want to make love to me. You want to screw me."

"The hell I do," he said. "I want nothing to do with you."

She laughed. "Oh yes you do. You've always wanted me. I'm the white woman you never had. I'm lots of things you never had."

"Yeah?" He could have spit then, and it would have been just the right punctuation. "There's a lot I never had."

She met his gaze with hers, held it lovingly, and her breath came out like an orgasm.

Despite himself, he was aroused. This angered him more. "Why don't you go play your games in another place, in another city, with someone who *wants* to play," he told her.

"This *is* another place in another city," she said.

"I don't want to play," he said.

"You can play if you want. I'm game."

Instead he stirred cold coffee with a cold spoon and a cold, cold heart that barely beat. *"I said I don't want to play."* The words came out quiet with hatred. His heart beat, and he wished he could stop it cold. *She* would be warm.

His blood ran hot down between his legs, and he became uncomfortable there, with her eyes focussed on him.

"Give in," she whispered. "Let go. It can't hurt."

He almost wished he could cry. "Yes it can."

"You detest me," she said. "You hate me. Why? Because I'm white? Or because you're black?"

And *that* was where it was.

"Because," he said. "You are what you are. I am what I am."

"You are what you are," she repeated. "I am what I am."

Smoke curled slowly out with the words, with the hidden meaning he thought he should get, but which he did not.

Her eyes suddenly burned red and went black again.

"You," he said. "You have no soul."

"I don't need one."

He had not even noticed it before, but now he felt her hand resting on his. His was white, hers black. He pulled his hand away quickly, and it was black again. Hers was white.

"Trust me," she whispered.

He didn't know what to say. Her eyes... they looked at him, and there was love in them, if that was what love looked like.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She opened her mouth, then paused, and thought for a moment. "I'm breaking down the walls of the world. I'm shattering the barriers of tradition and hate."

He thought about tradition and hate. "How?"

"I'm going to screw your brains out. Tonight."

Anger rose within him, but he smiled. "You think because I'm a black man that I can't pass up the chance to poke a white woman? Is that what you think?" He actually laughed. "Well maybe I will and maybe I won't. What do you think of that, White Goddess?" The *White Goddess* he added almost as an afterthought, and was pleased.

"I think you will."

"What are you gonna do? Rape me? I'd like to see you try. I could break you in half."

They sat in silence.

He imagined that she was one of those sick charity workers who got off by screwing underprivileged minorities. She had never starved, never had racial slurs screamed at her by children in passing school buses, never had a member of her own race refuse to marry her because she was a member of her own race.

But her eyes told him that she knew these things and more, so much more. Her eyes told him, but her mouth would not.

Maybe her eyes lied.

The eyes, window to the soul, but she had no soul.

Why can't you just leave me the fuck alone, he thought.

A member of her race.

She didn't blink.

"You must really want to fuck me," he said.

"I must."

"I should write a poem about you. Black Sausage for Mary."

"My name isn't Mary."

"What is your name?"

"It doesn't matter. It never matters."

"Okay. So I won't tell you my name."

"I'd forget it anyway."

"You really want to screw me?"

"I must."

The way she said it, the way the words flowed from her lips, the way they kissed his, tickled the nape of his neck, blew in his ear...

The blood *rushed...*

Uncomfortable.

But he wrote her a poem:

Black sausage for Mary
A black one up her butt
This sausage is ready
To pierce this brooding slut

He was pleased.

"You look it," she said.

He wanted to take her, to own her, to use her and throw her away. He stood suddenly. "Okay woman, White Goddess," he hissed. "Come with me and you'll get what you want, whether you really want it or not."

They left the cafe at midnight, just as she had planned, and walked to his apartment. The windows were covered up with sheets, nailed to the walls so in the daytime they couldn't be pulled aside to let in the light.

"I detest the sun when I'm here," he said. Sun is life, and he had no use for it.

She went to his bedroom, bare save for the large bed in the center, away from all walls.

"Keep the light on," she said. "I want us to see each other." She began to unbutton the longcoat. "Take your clothes off."

He hesitated, trying not to want this, but as he pulled off his T-shirt, he knew he did want it. More than anything else, he wanted her.

She had pulled off her skirt and her boots, and stood there before him in a T-shirt and panties. He stared at her inner thighs and swallowed dryness and struggled to get his own boots off. He lost his balance and almost fell.

She laughed. He stopped and glared at her, hate replacing desire for a moment. Her eyes were gone again, and where they had been there was *light.*

"Have fun," she said.

He pulled off his tight jeans and stood there in his white Hanes.

Watching him watch her, she slowly lifted her T-shirt up and over her head. Her breasts were glistening with sweat and heaved as her breath grew heavy, almost labored. When her panties were off, she came to him, put her fingers between the waistband of the Hanes and his skin, and slowly, very slowly, pulled them down.

"Step," she said.

He did.

"Other foot."

She stood slowly, her fingers now tracing lines up his sides. Standing close to him, nude, he realized the top of her head came to where his heart was supposed to be.

It beat.

She gently touched his testicles, crawled her fingers up his shaft and knelt. She lovingly and lightly kissed the head, then stood, and still holding on, led him to the bed.

He did not kiss her. He rubbed his cheek against hers and down her neck to her breast. The nipple was erect and waiting, and his tongue touched it, and then he sucked it desperately, afraid of being a man now with so many walls surrounding him and cutting him off. He thought about his mother as he sucked.

His mother was a whore.

"Mommy, was *that* my daddy?"

"No, sweetpea, he was just one of Mommy's boyfriends."

They were always white. Later, he learned the local black men couldn't afford her, and she didn't give it away for charity.

She pulled him forward as the invading images of his mother faded, and directed him into her. He exploded in rhythm, a dynamo of sexual energy, up-tempo, immature. She moved with him, letting him set the pace, then, with subtle adjustments, brought him over to her point of view.

He saw...

Her world was free where his was cheap. His anger met her understand-

ing and could only subside. The visions blurred in an ecstatic haze and an uncontrollable urgency mounted within him to thrust deeper into her being. He needed to know, and she needed to let him see. It was a circle being completed.

He bucked now, fully beyond any guidance from her, the animal instinct driving him faster and faster towards promised release. He came into her being a new creature, of newly conceived desire and meaning.

For a moment he drifted into sleep, a much needed rest, but he was awakened by a great weight upon him. And between him. And *in* him. His hands felt skin, a back. His eyes opened. A black hulk smothered him and he pushed, but his arms were too weak to move it. Suddenly it moaned and rolled off, and something slid out of *down there.*

Jesus God.

The body lying beside him *was* him. He knew then that the weak cage surrounding him was *her.*

His body stirred and woke, and sat up. Muscles tensed and untensed, stretched as if testing themselves. His body turned blank eyes toward him. It smiled.

"You'll have to leave."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"You must leave. You'll know where to go. It will all come to you."

"I live here!"

"Wrong. *I* live here. You don't belong here."

"You'll have to Goddamn throw me out!"

"I could break you in half."

Silent scream.

"Now get dressed and leave. Hurry. You're wasting my time."

She now, walked alone in rain, compelled to cross a street, turn a corner, cross another street. The sun was threatening exposure and it frightened her. She arrived at a building and went upstairs to an apartment on the sixth floor. She took a key from the pocket of the longcoat, tried it. It fit. She unlocked the door, pushed it open, and went inside.

TV, VCR, stereo, microwave.

Sunlight beginning to streak in through wide open windows, letting the apartment breathe.

In the bedroom, a king-size bed, and in the closet, a man's clothes.

There is nothing real here, he thought, because his mind was still the mind of an angry black man. In the mirror she looked back with green eyes. The longcoat came off, her body stood awkwardly, without grace in the center of the room. He knew, she knew, that there was no longer a basis for hate. Some day her body would stand with the grace and passion of one born to it. It was inevitable. She slept.

At the end of the day, the front door opened, closed.

"Yo, baby, I'm home! Ain't you gonna come out here and give your man a kiss?"

She went into the living room and saw him. Her husband. Gold Rolex, manicured nails, briefcase.

"Sweetheart, get closer," he said as he swept her into his arms. "Guess what. I got the promotion!"

They embraced.

"I'm so proud of you," she had to say, yet she still barely repressed a shudder.

He squeezed her. "And they said I wouldn't be able to handle a white girl."

They kissed.

If she could have broken him in half, she wouldn't have.

The body of the big black man was not easy to get used to. Already he had broken a glass accidentally by setting it down too hard. One beer was all that was left in the fridge. He drank it, then left the apartment. He walked along the street, feeling the powerful body take him where he needed to go. To wait. It would be easier this time, with his strength, quicker.

Then he heard the blonde, with her quick steps resounding defiantly in the alley. Her hatred for him, and all men, was like a storm surrounding her. She was too aware of her own weakness, appalled by her own fragility.

He stepped out of the doorway he'd been leaning in, smoking, and blocked her way.

"What do you want?" There was barely a hint of fear in her voice.

"You," he said, and grabbed her. His big hands were wrapped around her and they dragged her into the doorway. He ripped off her skirt and forced her over.

"Why are you doing this?" the woman cried as he fumbled with his zipper.

The walls of the world, he thought, but said only, "I must."

***Steve Antczak** has had short fiction published, mostly in the States, in paperback anthologies like Newer York and A Confederacy of the Dead, as well as in In Dreams in the UK. He has stories coming out in Tomorrow Speculative Fiction and Deathrealm magazines, and in the forthcoming anthologies Journeys to the Twilight Zone Vol.3, and Larger Than Life. Watch out for the superb Pop Goes Weasel in a future issue of TTA.*

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from Paul Beardsley

It's time one or two things were sorted out. I did not quote Chris Kenworthy out of context. "Writing is not about the communication of ideas" was one of several stand-alone sweeping statements. It's a pretty stupid thing to say, regardless of whether one is talking about creative writing or ink marks on paper, because it more than implies that ideas-based stories don't count, and we should stop writing and reading them altogether. My use of a pun, according to Chris, confirms my love for traditional hack writing. How on Earth does he work that one out? (I note, incidentally, that he effectively uses the same pun himself in *The Sun Rises Red.*) Until the man shows evidence of an ability to think rationally, I see no purpose in commenting further on anything he's written.

from James Miller

I was again impressed by the audacity and variety of TTA. I read Roger Stone's piece in time to the Eagles classic and enjoyed its gradual sense of dislocation and alienation, the way it progressively opened doors into my imagination. *A Room at Mrs Rajalaxmi's, Clean & Bright* and *Hearing Colour* seemed to be stories on a similar theme, investigating different perceptions of reality. Mat Coward's witty and lucid piece was, I think, the most enjoyable. I found it thought provoking, disturbing and somehow delightful. *The Vindictive Studio* was enjoyably mystifying, and I thought Allen Ashley's story was excellent, crammed with brilliant ideas. It was the sort of SF I love; concerned with people, experience and sensation. The sexual-narcotic imagery reminded me of some of William Burroughs' work (a slipstream writer if ever there was one). Both *Ultima Tundra* and bits of *A Change in Her Weather* had moments of visionary poetic intensity. Superb stuff!

From the material I've read it's clear that TTA is far more self-consciously literate than most zines. Language, methods of expressing ideas, events and emotions seems almost as crucial as that which is expressed. Form and content are inseparable and indistinguishable. In most genre fiction, the events that constitute the novel (the plot?) are more important than the methods of expressing these events. For example, most fantasy readers want dragons, magic etc and don't really care too much about the style the novel is written in. This is OK for superficial, sensational fiction designed only to entertain and divert. TTA, I think, is trying to do more than simply amuse...good slipstream writing has the potential to redefine the limits of what is considered 'acceptable' fiction. It has the ability to redefine the mainstream and create new genres. What TTA seems to be trying to do is so much more interesting than what most zines publish because it is excitingly different and very relevant. In the post-modernist wilderness of the present new forms of expression better suited to our concerns and predicaments need to be found. It seems to me TTA could play an important role in shaping the fiction of our new *fin de siecle.* I only hope that it starts to be noticed beyond the realms of pulp and cult zines and the underground press.

from Nigel Long

Dave Mooring is sickeningly talented. How *does* he do it? Bah! (Leaves room in a fit of envy.) Seriously, TTA3 is the best yet. You seem to have taken the strengths of the second issue and built on them. I can't remember the last time I read a small press mag and found so many off-the-wall/left-of-centre pieces of fiction that hit home in different ways. *Four Miles to the Hotel California* was beautiful and low-key, it just dragged you along with its quiet momentum. *Walking the Wall* cut like a knife, but I don't know why. Ditto *Shellfish & Switchblades. A Room at Mrs Rajalaxmi's* I can relate to in my current semi-delirious state *[flu medication].* I remember having a tooth pulled as a kid; they gave you gas back then and as I went under I saw numbers flying all over the place, algebraic formulae, etc. I think I can almost visualise what John Gimblett was getting at. *Chickening Out*: lovely! *Partying* hit a raw nerve...it was uncomfortably close to the bone. *Hearing Colour* might have been my favourite, who knows, I liked the idea of taking a single impossibility and building a series of possibilities out of it. It had a crazy logic that surfed effortlessly on itself. Funny and moving at the same time. *Messages from Betelgeuse*...sure, why not. Daz adverts and *Hancock's Half-Hour* reaching sentient lichens on

Zeta Reticuli. Poor bastards...*Pump* was great fun...oh, and *7 Rides to Venus* was sticky in all the right places. Seriously, a great issue.

Chris Kenworthy's letter was almost as interesting/thought-provoking as his article. I find myself in agreement with him again, except that a pessimistic outlook on life should not necessarily be seen as being more intellectually 'deep' (yeah, I know Chris didn't actually say that, but it always strikes me that there is an almost unspoken belief that unless you approach life 100% seriously you are considered shallow in some way). Since life and the universe is basically meaningless and chaotic, then humour (in the face of the void) is as much of an appropriate response as well-argued pessimism. Sure, don't tag forced 'happy' endings on the rear of a story, but Miserabilism hasn't got an awful lot going for it as a way of life, and it's a fallacy that a gloom-tinted view of life is necessarily a purer or truer one. And hey, what the hell is wrong with kitsch anyway? In the right hands it's a heckuva powerful weapon!

from John Francis Haines

Loved Andy Darlington's *Betelgeuse/Relativity* poem, but I hope it's set 30 years in the future because if we are receiving the signals 30 years after they first got them, they should be responding to signals sent *out* 30 years before that—in other words, 60 years old. If it's set in the present, the inhabitants ought to be dancing the Charleston, wearing long pearl necklaces and reading *The Waste Land.* Sorry about that, it was a super poem and made me laugh out loud—more! *Hotel California ought* to have been the standout story, and looked to be just that right up to the end. Beautifully written, odd, quirky, but I found the ending too abrupt, too enigmatic. Is she dead? Has she always been dead and everything else just his imagination? Has something happened, if so, why? Too much was left for the reader to decide. *Why* has Western civilisation apparently disappeared? No explanation was offered. *Clean & Bright* was just a bit too deliberately surreal to be a real hit, but it was well written and good fun. Found the ending a bit telegraphed, it was obvious he was going to either start cleaning his own air or suffer the consequences of not doing so. Steve Sneyd's *A Change in her Weather* was another terrific poem, a kaleidoscope of images with a superb definition of poetry in its final lines. *Trésor* was a cracking horror story, but as with so much of the fiction this issue, left me wondering about the *reasons* for it all—it was a superb middle and end, but seemed to lack a satisfactory beginning. *Partying* had better construction and was quite a good story; *7 Rides to Venus* was different and quite original, I liked it. For me, the main weakness of this type of fiction is that it asks too much of the reader, not because of any real inherent difficulty, but because the writers tend to leave too much *out.* You have to find a balance between telling too much and not enough. I'm all in favour of making the reader work for his or her enjoyment, but it's not fair to expect them to write half the story for you!

from Neil K Henderson

Regarding the slipstream debate—it's certainly opened my eyes to what the term actually denotes. I'd previously been led to believe (by editors trying to be helpful) that slipstream was the new *stream-of-consciousness*—doubtless confused by the *stream* element. I see now that it is simply denoting a relationship to *mainstream.* I agree with most of what has been said in favour of promoting experimental writing (too many zines *claiming* to publish the experimental really only want conformity to formula), and also with the view that *experimental* is no excuse for lack of ability. The analogy with painting comes to mind. Picasso and Lowry etc had to prove their technical ability in the accepted field before their idiosyncratic styles gained general approval. But it is these idiosyncrasies that they are now remembered, and even revered, for. And here I must take Christopher Alsop to task for clinging to that age-old delusion of *originality.* How can anything be truly original at this late stage in literary evolution? Language does not have an infinite capacity for new ways of expression—anything you can think of has been tried before by someone, somewhere, sometime. The best any writer can hope for in the novelty stakes is to leave the fingerprint of *individuality* on his work, to a greater or lesser degree. Surely, the quest for originality as an end must be as restrictive to 'honest' writing as the imposition of a rigid artificial plot. One must write what one believes in, in the style most comfortably suited to the needs of the story. Subsequent 'originality' is a by-product.

TTA looks set to become a byword for excellence in the blinking of an eye...issue 3 is a

beauty, made all the more impressive to me by the inclusion of some lighter mooded pieces such as *Clean & Bright* and *Hearing Colour.* I can appreciate that many of the mood-orientated stories are liable to be more sombre of tone, but it's good to have some cheerier contrast in the context of a collection. The trouble with producing a collection of such a high standard is that comments are likely to read like a regurgitation of the contents page. *Trésor* was particularly effective—and for a third short piece ever written, shows great promise for Justina Robson. *Partying* hit me right in the guts. This was a message which required a minimum of 'experimental' technique to get across. Peter Finch handled it very well. Norman Jope's *Ultima Tundra* was mind-blowingly evocative, like a painting by Max Ernst (with shades of Richard Dadd). You are certainly providing an exciting platform for less-easily-categorisable new work. I hope my semi-hastily written letter makes some sense. If not, I'd like to distance myself from responsibility by placing the blame on a society that doesn't *care* what slipstream means, and is placing me under psychological strain by filling all the art galleries with specially mounted dog turds.

from Alan Frackleton

Thanks for TTA3. I was very impressed. I like the simple no-nonsense layout, and the fiction was excellent, particularly *Four Miles to the Hotel Califronia, Pump* and *7 Rides to Venus.* I'm not really a fan of poetry so I can't comment fairly on the selection, though I keep turning back to karen verba's *can't catch me i'm the gingerbread man,* so maybe that's going to change. The cover was rather good too. I'm only sorry I missed 1 & 2—any chance of getting hold of them?

•I'm afraid issues 1, 2 & 3 have completely sold out. It's possible to reprint them but not feasible for just a few copies—maybe a sort of 'best-of' anthology is a good idea...

from Gary Couzens

I particularly liked Des Lewis' story—now *there's* a master of strange atmosphere. That was probably my favourite in the issue, though others came close. I do have a liking for stories that are close to everyday realism, but with an underlying strangeness—what slisptream should really be about, I guess. Justina Robson's *Trésor* fell into this category, with its meticulous depiction of place and mood; likewise, though differently, was Peter Finch's *Partying.* Others were more overtly surreal, such as Mat Coward's *Clean & Bright* (a metaphor literalised) and Tim Nickels' synaesthesia exercise *Hearing Colour.* The poetry was more of a mixed bag: I couldn't get my head round Steve Sneyd's piece, which is maybe my loss. The presentation was as good as ever. Dave Mooring's cover was up to his first. The only major typo I found was the transposition of Andrew Darlington and David Grubb's poems on the contents page.

• Transposition is a necessary function of experimental slipstreaming.

from John Gaunt

The production side of things seems to have improved (if that's possible, the last 2 issues were as slick as a black eel in a wet suit). Dave Mooring's front cover was exceptional, superior even to that of #1. As for the fiction, *Four Miles to the Hotel California* had a sort of mysterious air about it, and sort of crept up on you before you realised you'd even started to read. DF Lewis' *The Absence* I'm afraid wasn't really what I would consider speculative or slipstream (but please, massa, don't ask me what I *would* call slipstream), more of a ponderous piece, which neither drew conclusions or even asked questions from which conclusions might be drawn. *A Room at Mrs Rajalaxmi's* was a competently written piece...yes, I enjoyed that one. *Clean & Bright* was one of the best of the issue: perfect prose style, brilliantly original, and, with a huge slab of black humour, I'd say as good a piece I've read all year. *The Vindictive Studio* had a certain *foreign* feel to it, but for some reason I never actually felt as if I was in Paris. Talk about mood fiction, *Trésor* had it all: dark night, seedy area, prostitution, facial disfiguration (mmm...I think that's the part that got me hot), and a prose style that fits the whole lot together very well indeed—nice one! *Partying*: was it speculative? Was it slipstream? Have you ever said that that's all you're ever going to publish? Of course not. A very interesting piece of writing, also quite sad. *Hearing Colour*: good. But for me the best was saved for last. Allen Ashley's *7 Rides to Venus* was simply fantastic, even though it did borrow much of its style from Burroughs' *Cities of the Red Night*, which doesn't bother me in the slightest as that was

one of the first and best books I read. Excellent, wish he'd sent it my way. The poetry was all of a high standard too, my favourite being *Shellfish and Switchblades*. Overall Andy, a very fine third issue. Keep it up.

from Murray C Steward

Very much enjoyed TTA3, for my money the strongest collection of fiction so far. If there were still any sceptics out there who needed convincing, this issue must surely have laid forever the twin spectres of Self-Indulgence and Miserabilism. 'Happy' endings weren't widely in evidence, but neither did these tales come over as exercises in navel-gazing or a manifesto for potential suicides. The sheer breadth of imagination, in both subject matter and treatment, encompassed by (to choose at random) *Pump, Clean & Bright* and *7 Rides to Venus,* was like a rush of fresh air blowing the cobwebs away. *Trésor* was a real gem, the vividly intimate portrait of the woman Lily giving way to the kind of shockingly arbitrary violence that characterises real-life murder. At first I felt the murder was one of those gratuitous, pointless 'twists' I loathe so much, but on re-reading I realised I'd been rebelling against the idea of it purely because I'd been empathising so closely with the focus character. Fine piece of writing. Smell, perhaps the most evocative of the senses, can be the most difficult to convey in words, because the impressions it leaves are so elusive, but Justina Robson rose to the challenge with consummate skill. Allen Ashley's *7 Rides* and Roger Stone's *Hotel California* were my other favourites: *7 Rides* almost had the scope of a novel, while *Hotel California* haunted me long after I'd read it. Rooted firmly in the familiar SF world of a post-apocalyptic near-future, it gave the lie yet again to the frequent misconceived notion that characters in SF stories are by definition one-dimensional cyphers. These were people we could strongly identify and sympathise with.

However anyone cares to categorise the stories in TTA3 their quality, individually and as a whole collection, speaks for itself. TTA was effectively my introduction to the world of small press fiction, and I'd have had to go a long way to find a better one. Looking forward to issue 4.

from Alan Baker

I've always thought that A5 is a nice size, although it does restrict the use of illustrations. I don't know what your policy towards illustrations is, but personally I can do without them. The cover art is very impressive and worth a hundred of the crude pen-and-inks to be found in so many other magazines. It reminded me a little of JK Potter's work, but had a quietly sinister aspect that his images sometimes lack. I think you would do well to stay with subtle images like this, since I believe that part of the reason for SF's pariah-like status in literature is the god-awful, gaudy visual images that have so often been associated with it—lowbrow, downmarket images that immediately alienate all those so-called devotees of 'high art', who are more used to the pitiful parochialisms of the English novel.

As for the stories themselves, I think you're right: moonliners wouldn't quite fit in a magazine like this! The thread that seems to run through the issue is that of the normal, mundane world gradually breaking apart like an inept photomontage to reveal the true nature of reality, be it terrifying and inimical, as in *The Absence,* or full of synchronicitous connections, as in *A Room at Mrs Rajalaxmi's,* or full of psychological ensnarements, as in the infectious obsessive compulsive behaviour afflicting the protagonist in *Clean & Bright*. In short (and positively *no* bullshit here), this is one of the few magazines I've read which is full of stories by people who can actually write well. This is something not even *Interzone* can boast of, in my view.

from Scott Kleager, Cologne, Germany

Now that I've got my hands on your magazine, I believe that the gradual decline of some good literary magazines into homogenized predictability over the last six years has been due less to the quality of submissions than to the timid, trembling *choice* of what is published. It was refreshing to read a magazine with the balls to ignore political correctness and concentrate instead on entertaining and well-written stories. The Germans say "alle Anfang ist schwer" and it must be a lotta work starting up, getting each issue out, especially when so many other magazines (some of them undeserving) are getting public funds—although if I were Prime Minister, I'd give the money to all literary endeavours, good and bad. In my opinion, the future of TTA looks bright indeed.

Thanks everyone for the essential feedback. Keep it coming!

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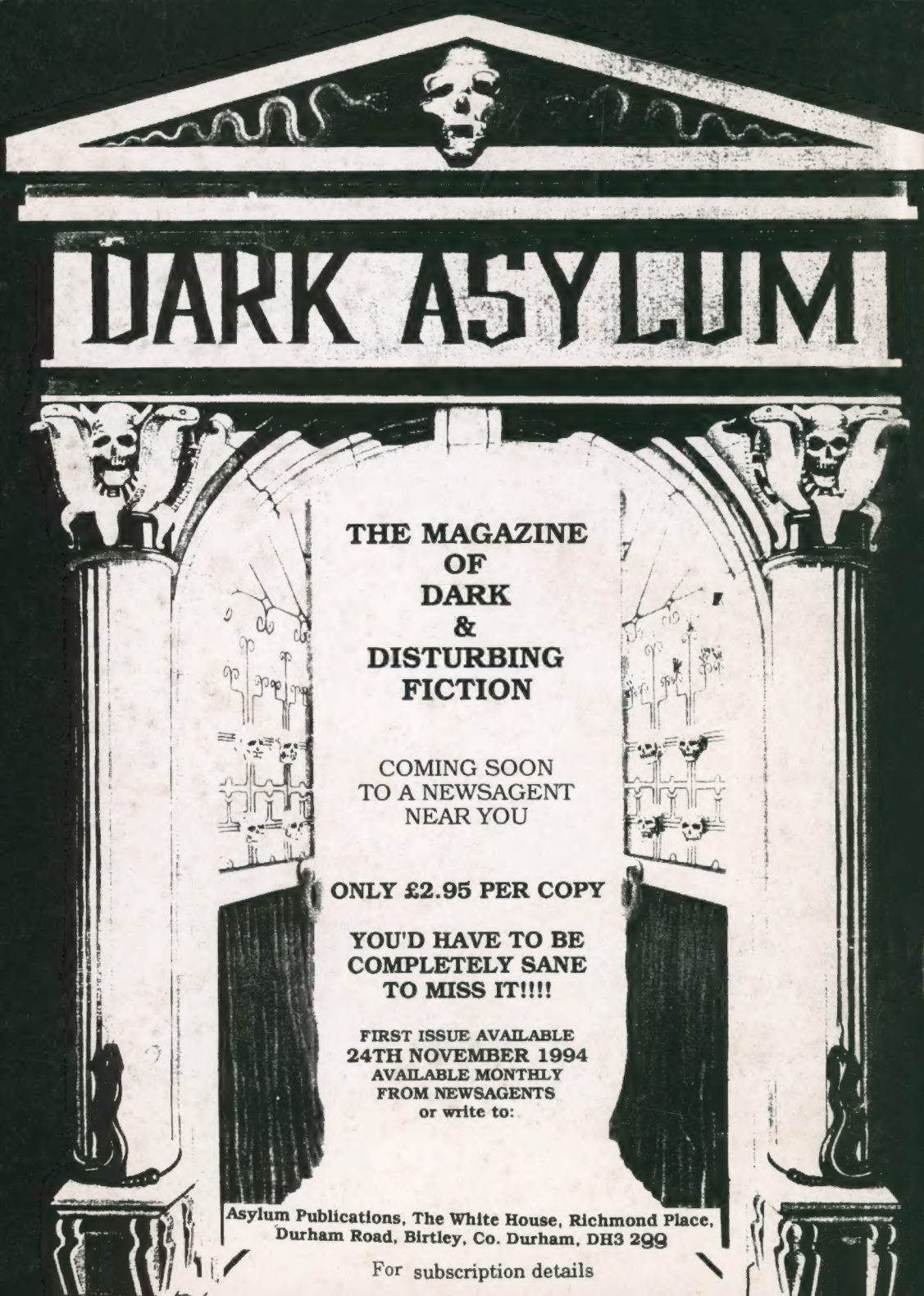
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